7
Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
cura
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Saint's Guidance and the Battle for the North

Characters

Private tutor to the dukes' daughters/
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

Allen

Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Stella's private tutor possesses an extraordinary command of magic, although he remains oblivious to his talents.

Royal Academy
student council vice president

Caren

Allen's younger sister by adoption is levelheaded but surprisingly needy. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.

Ducal House of Howard, northernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms

Duke Howard's
second daughter

Tina Howard

After her talents blossomed thanks to Allen's tutoring, this young lady placed first on her Royal Academy entrance exam.

Duke Howard's eldest daughter/
Royal Academy
student council president

Stella Howard

Tina's serious and hardworking elder sister is the heir to the Dukedom of Howard.

Tina's personal maid

Ellie Walker

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.

Ducal House of Leinster, southernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms

Duke Leinster's eldest daughter/
Lady of the Sword

Lydia Leinster

Allen's highborn partner is a loose cannon, but she's also the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman.

Duke Leinster's
second daughter

Lynne Leinster

Lydia's younger sister placed second on her Royal Academy entrance exam. She sees Tina, who placed first, as a rival.

Table of Contents

Cover
Characters

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Epilogue

Afterword
Color Illustrations
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Download all your Fav Light Novels from Just Light Novels

Prologue

"So, we're winning?" I asked.

"We are indeed, Grant."

The tenth day since we had launched the Great Cause—our rebellion against the Royal House of Wainwright—found me, Duke Grant Algren, on the wooded outskirts of the eastern capital, closeted in a secret room of my house's villa. With me were Greck, the eldest of my younger brothers, and his right-hand man, Earl Raymond Despenser. They had made a temporary return by wyvern to report on the state of the war. My next-youngest brother Gregory was also in attendance, concealing his meager physique under a gray robe.

"My army has successfully occupied the royal capital and the central region around it," Greck declared, radiating confidence as he flourished his pointer at the map of the kingdom on the table. "You won't be shocked to hear that we were far from alone in viewing the royal family's recent policies as a threat to the existing social order! I've also taken custody of Gerard Wainwright, who had been transported to the royal capital. He can't even speak anymore, but he'll make a serviceable puppet king. And"—his pointer struck the north and south—"I bring good news concerning the Howards and Leinsters too. As it seems, a few days ago, both houses opened hostilities on their borders—with the Yustinian Empire and the League of Principalities, respectively. Initial reports have it that the Leinsters lost their first engagement and are on the defensive, while the Howards are in the process of withdrawing their troops and subjects from Galois! Make haste, Grant! The time is ripe for your advance on the royal capital!"

"Well spoken!" I saw myself sitting on the throne. The puppet Gerard would occupy it in reality, but for all intents and purposes, I would be king.

"Wait a moment, Grant, Greck," Gregory interjected. I turned to find him bending over the map.

"What is it?" Greck asked, annoyed at having his proposal

interrupted. “Do you have something to add?”

“Yes, three things.” A pale, spindly finger touched the west of the kingdom. “First, Gerard is the only royal we’ve managed to capture. And in the west, the Lebuferas, their vassals, and the Order of Royal Knights remain a force to be reckoned with.”

Greck clicked his tongue disagreeably. He had hoped to seize the royal family along with their capital, but fierce resistance from the knights of the guard and the royals’ personal escorts had thwarted that plan.

“I’m well aware of that!” he snapped. “But I’m certain we wounded the king, and the western forces can’t leave their posts! The Ducal House of Lebufera and the Order of Royal Knights haven’t moved in two hundred years! Not since the War of the Dark Lord!”

“Precisely. They can’t risk weakening the defenses…” Gregory responded dispassionately as his finger traversed the map again, coming to a halt on the kingdom’s western border—Blood River, a battlefield that the human race could never forget. Only memories of bitter defeat lingered there, where our dreams of reclaiming the holy land and striking down the Dark Lord had been dashed. “Lest the demons resume their eastward march.”

“Then what are you—”

“But that logic would only apply if we had the king and his family in our hands,” Gregory continued, breezing past Greck’s interruption. “According to my information, they’ve withdrawn to the western capital. The Lebuferas won’t move, but I fear the Order of Royal Knights very well might.”

“But not all of them,” Greck snarled and pounded his fist on the map. “We can handle a detachment!”

Our failure to capture the royal family had been a miscalculation. I motioned for Gregory to continue. My second-youngest brother was rising in my estimation, despite his frailty and the vulgar blood in his veins, due to his useful insights into the situation here in the eastern capital. In the hands of a skilled player, every piece had its uses.

“Second, the Howards and Leinsters.”

“Both are in retreat,” Greck countered. “My intelligence is up to date and corroborated by multiple wyvern and griffin messages. Even the Knights of the Holy Spirit confirm that both houses have opened hostilities!”

We had been tipped off that our comrades in the Yustinian Empire and the League of Principalities had turned both powers toward expansionism but planned to halt their armies after reclaiming lost territory. I considered deception on that front highly improbable.

"I don't doubt that they've gone to war," Gregory responded, sounding unsure of himself. "But don't you think word has reached the royal capital sooner than it should?"

"What are you getting at?" I asked, looking down at the map. Numerous violet pieces—our allies—covered the east and center of the kingdom. The only other pieces near the royal capital represented Marquesses Crom and Gardner, who had yet to show their colors. Azure, scarlet, and emerald pieces marked our enemies in the north, south, and west. Beyond our borders, clear markers represented the northern Yustinian Empire and the southern principalities of Atlas and Bazel. And thanks to the intercession of the Knights of the Holy Spirit, we could count both foreign powers among our allies. From this bird's-eye view, our position seemed unassailable.

"Communications between the ducal houses are severed," murmured Gregory. "So I merely wonder how the royal capital—and only the royal capital—can learn of events so swiftly."

"Oh, is that all?" Greck laughed dismissively. "The empire and the league must have outnumbered them three to one at the least, and you can't argue with numbers! Isn't that right, Raymond?"

"It is," Raymond answered, breaking his silence. "Naturally, we've gathered intelligence from multiple sources, and everything points to the facts that the Howards have abandoned Galois and the Leinsters suffered an initial defeat."

Gregory inclined his head to Greck. "I beg your pardon," he said, conceding the point without further argument. Greck let out a triumphant snort.

I agreed that events were moving too quickly, but so long as the better part of our foes were pinned down in the north, south, and west, we had nothing to fear.

"And your third point, Gregory?" I prompted.

"Of course." Gregory hesitated for a moment. Then, "The eastern capital and its Great Tree are not yet fully under our control."

Greck stared at me in disbelief. "What does he mean by that,

Grant? You only had a handful of royal guards and those conceited animals squatting in our city to contend with. How could they hold out for ten whole days?!"

I recalled my clash with the Leinsters' eldest son, an animal, and a mock beast on the first day of the Great Cause. I folded my arms and kept my vexation in check as I explained the situation. "I hate to praise the enemy, but Richard Leinster and his knights are a formidable force. We've driven them back halfway across the Great Bridge—almost to the tree itself—but they stubbornly continue to resist."

"We promised the Knights of the Holy Spirit partial control of the Great Tree," Greck responded, lowering his voice. "Unless we come up with a solution soon, this could strain our relationship with the church once the war is over."

The beastfolk had long unjustly claimed possession of the eastern capital's Great Tree and used it to extract massive concessions. That we would reclaim it for humanity went without saying, but we also owed it to the Knights of the Holy Spirit, who had entered the fray on our behalf. It wouldn't do to let this conflict drag on.

"Greck," I said, looking my brother in the eye, "recall the Violet Order. With their aid, we shall crush the royal guard and fulfill our obligation to the church. I trust you won't object, since you have the royal capital in hand."

"Their leader, Haag Harclay, is a dangerous man," Greck hesitantly responded.

"Old Harclay built and trained the order himself," added Raymond. "Allowing them to join forces with Haig Hayden's knights and Zaur Zani's troops might be inadvisable. If they turned traitor—"

"Haag, Hayden, and Zaur are relics. They won't turn their backs on the House of Algren now that I've inherited its symbol, Deep Violet," I confidently declared, gazing at the enchanted halberd propped on the chair beside me.

I've already succeeded my father. I am *Duke Algren!*

Before embarking upon the Great Cause, I had made one last report to my father—the pitiful fool who had championed the Royal House of Wainwright and its moves to strip the aristocracy of our established privileges in the name of "meritocracy." From the sickbed where my poison had put him, Guido Algren had said

forlornly, “Stop this nonsense, Grant. If you go ahead with this, our house will be forever known as shameless ingrates. Remember our forebears’ blunder at Blood River.”

He truly was a fool. How could he allow the events of two hundred years ago to bind him still? We owed the beastfolk nothing, and we were certainly under no obligation to honor the Old Pledge! As far as I’d read, our ancestors had merely suffered trifling losses in the initial engagement!

I doubt you’re still conscious, but I hope you’re watching as I, Grant Algren, rule this kingdom!

“Except for the futile resistance at the Great Tree, everything is proceeding more or less as planned,” I announced. “We’ll start by plucking that little thorn from our side, then pick off the remaining pockets of resistance one by one.”

“Yes, sir!” Greck and Raymond responded.

“Grant,” Gregory cut in timorously, “j-just two more details, if you don’t mind.”

“Out with them,” I said, losing patience.

“What about Gil?”

“Don’t kill him unless he turns on us. Retrieve the dagger imbued with vestiges of Radiant Shield and keep him where he can do no harm.”

My detestable youngest brother, Gil Algren, had been our father’s favorite. Whispers had even hailed him as the most likely of us to inherit the dukedom. He hadn’t joined the Great Cause at first, so, on the advice of my spy Konoha, I had placed him under house arrest. Bringing Gil into our designs would have risked alerting the Leinsters in any case—the Brain of the Lady of the Sword had been his university upperclassman, and true to his nickname, that mock beast was close to Lydia Leinster herself. Pitting Gil against his troublesome schoolmate had been Gregory’s idea.

“Gil seems awfully taken with that fellow,” he had said. “Wouldn’t it make for an amusing diversion?”

A shocking suggestion, even coming from my own flesh and blood. I had no idea how Gregory had put the matter to Gil, but the result was that our youngest brother had struck down the mock beast. He was too deeply implicated to turn against us now.

“I understand,” Gregory said. “As for the other matter… Lord Despenser.”

“How may I be of service?” Raymond answered, warily eyeing

Gregory.

"Have there been any difficulties with supplies?"

"None worth mentioning. Duke Grant's idea to provision our troops by rail is working splendidly!"

"Is that so?"

"Gregory," Greck cut in, sternly reproving, "do you mean to suggest that our supply lines are not as they should be?"

"N-No, nothing of the kind. Forgive me; I was merely a bit nervous. Grant, I've nothing more to— Well, actually, there is one little thing."

"Gregory..."

"I will take custody of that mock beast," he said hurriedly, waving his hands. "I haven't informed Hayden or Zaur."

"That truly is a little thing," I replied dismissively. I might have punished the mock beast personally, but this would do.

"Do as you please," Greck added at almost the same moment and with equal disdain.

"What use do you have for the likes of him?" I asked, noting the look of undisguised relief on Gregory's face.

He chuckled. "You have to ask?" A chill ran over my skin, but I couldn't fathom why. Gregory still wore his usual smile. "Animals are only good for one thing—a little experiment."

*

Once the secret council was over, I entered the hidden room and found Master Gregory alone, moving pieces on the map with his right hand and toying roughly with an emblem of the Holy Spirit in his left.

"My lord," I called softly.

"Ito," he responded, not minding his tone now that we were alone in the room. "Don't use that raspy voice. And drop your disguise—it irks me."

"I beg your pardon." The wrinkles vanished from my face, neck, and hands, and I grew even shorter as I resumed my true voice and appearance. Pushing back my gray hood, I moved to my lord's side, bothered by my deep-black and gray bangs.

"Well?" he asked, without looking up from the map.

"I have them here," I replied, handing over the papers I'd acquired. They revealed the state of rebel supplies in the royal

capital.

My lord snatched them roughly and checked the spots I had bookmarked. Then he sank into the chair behind him. “I thought as much,” he spat, toying with a clear game piece. “How long will that lot in the royal capital hold out?”

“Assuming nothing changes...perhaps a month.”

The royal capital produced nothing edible. The city had its own water supply, but it needed to import provisions and all other necessities from elsewhere. Grant’s plan to maintain supply lines by railway was supposed to solve that issue. However...

“It was always just an armchair theory,” my lord remarked, “but I still can’t believe they bungled every part of it this badly! The trains don’t run on time, they aren’t unloaded efficiently, and the stockpiles of provisions end up rotting at stations here and in the royal capital because no one arranged to distribute them. No wonder that clod Greck can’t bring himself to report this mess.”

“Most of the great merchants are refusing to cooperate,” I supplied. “Apparently, the head of the Toretto family is covertly informing his colleagues that the rebellion is doomed to fail. Scouting parties also frequently go missing on the outskirts of the royal capital, while rails and signals suffer sabotage. The situation worsens by the day.”

“Payback for taking Momiji Toretto prisoner, I suppose. And the saboteurs must be in the employ of other ducal houses. But Grant’s never given a thought to maintaining rail infrastructure. That leaves him to feed more than a hundred thousand soldiers and the population of the royal capital using only what smaller firms can provide—which is impossible.” My lord flung the documents onto the table. As their pages turned, the name of one merchant caught my eye: Ernest Fosse, recommended by Earl Rupert. Then he crossed his legs in irritation, fidgeting with both the glass game piece and the church insignia. “It looks like the oafs will lose their war even sooner than anticipated. What have you learned about the Howards and Leinsters?”

“Both houses are definitely facing external enemies. As for the Lebuferas—”

“The west won’t budge. Don’t waste my time with useless trivia.”

“I beg your pardon.” I bobbed my head in sincere apology. As he said, the Ducal House of Lebufera and their western vassals

would never take up arms against a mere rebellion.

"Lev tossed the Brain of the Lady of the Sword into the Fire Fiend's keyhole. But will it open, I wonder," my lord mused. "Once the Violet Order returns, we can take the Great Tree. Animals that roll over for wealth and status are wonderfully easy to manage. The church has the royal capital's Great Tree and the royal archive, and if they got what they came for, there's no point in staying here. Gil will make an amusing specimen. Grant can have Deep Violet; that toy suits a dolt like him. And then there's that man Lev retrieved to tinker with—I must test him in combat. Now, if I can only get my hands on the Fire Fiend's papers, I could become the greatest sorcerer alive. When Lev gets back, I must..."

Once Master Gregory worked himself into this state, he needed some time to find his way back.

Lev was away in the northeast of the kingdom, visiting a tiny island in the Four Heroes Sea, the continent's largest saline lake. My lord had met the self-proclaimed "apostle" several years ago on a visit to the pontiff's domain. And although the vain, shifty man presented himself as our ally, who could say what he got up to behind our backs. Yet my lord had said of him, "The Church of the Holy Spirit and their revolting Saint are all pieces on my game board! But not Lev—he's a kindred spirit."

You're clever, my darling little Master Gregory. You can see through most things. But did you know, my lord? Although the west would never move against a mere rebellion...

"The Lebuferas, their vassals, and the demonfolk of my cherished homeland haven't forgotten Shooting Star or their Old Pledge with him," I whispered, just on the edge of hearing.

My lord did not respond. He remained lost in thought, just like when he'd been a little boy. And I never tired of watching him.

Chapter 1

"It's not true! You expect me to believe that my tutor—that Allen stayed behind to face certain death and never made it back to the Great Tree?! I refuse to accept it!"

The scream of my younger sister, Tina Howard, filled our father's office on the outskirts of the northern capital. Her little body shook, and both her hair—platinum faintly tinged with azure—and the snow-white ribbon tied behind her head rose with the mana she unconsciously radiated.

"Big Sis Stella," the girl in a maid uniform to my left murmured, with tears in her eyes, and hugged my arm. Ellie Walker was Tina's personal attendant and practically a second sister to me.

"It's all right, Ellie," I said. "Tina, calm down. Let's hear her out first."

Ellie fell silent. After a few moments, Tina murmured, "All right."

I'd taken a calm tone for their benefit, but if they hadn't been here, I might well have been wailing too. A storm raged in my heart.

Mr. Allen. Mr. Allen! Mr. Allen*!*

"Continue your report," urged a powerfully built, platinum-haired man seated in a chair—Tina's and my father, Duke Walter Howard.

"Yes, sir!" responded Celerian Ceynoth, the lady knight of the royal guard who had come bearing news of the war in the eastern capital. Despite her many wounds, she remained on one knee, head lowered, and closed her eyes as she continued her report. "We launched a desperate search for Mr. Allen as soon as we returned from New Town, but we failed to locate him. Then, one of my fellow knights and I obtained Skyhawk Company griffins and escaped the city. I went north, and he, south. I sincerely apologize for my late arrival; I was forced to make a number of detours on the way."

Ten days had already passed since the outbreak of a

conservative noble rebellion spearheaded by the eastern Ducal House of Algren. We had spent the intervening time slowly gathering intelligence, including a few bits of undeniably good news, such as a report that His Majesty and the rest of the royal family were alive and well in the western capital. The news that my friend Felicia Fosse, who had been working at Allen & Co. in the royal capital when the insurrection began, was safe in the south had also come as a relief. But the situation in the royal and eastern capitals remained a mystery. According to the man nearing old age who waited behind my father—our spymaster and head butler Graham Walker—the rebel army in the royal capital was making no moves, but his analysis had revealed nothing else.

"I knew he would push himself too far," groaned the bespectacled, scholarly gentleman who stood beside my father, pressing his left hand to his forehead. The professor was both one of my father's oldest friends and one of the kingdom's finest sorcerers. "Allen is a fool! An absolute dunderhead!"

I almost protested, but one look at the professor convinced me to hold my tongue. His face was a mask of regret, and his anger was at himself.

"I know he could have escaped alone if he'd had the mind to, but true to his name, he chose to follow in Shooting Star's footsteps!" the professor continued. "Celerian, how long can Richard hold out?"

Shooting Star was a legend of the wolf clan. When human and demonkind had clashed in the War of the Dark Lord, he had led a brigade mostly of beastfolk. And Mr. Allen was his namesake, as Caren—Mr. Allen's younger sister and my best friend—had once happily told me.

"The vice commander's words were 'We're royal guards. Duke Howard and the professor will know what that means,'" Celerian replied.

"He'll fight to the bitter end then," the professor said. "I'd expect no less of Liam's son."

"I admire his resolve," my father added. "But his situation must have been too dire to give a definite answer."

Both men groaned.

I touched the sea-green griffin feather secreted in my left breast pocket—a gift from Mr. Allen. He and Caren were in my thoughts.

"And what of the empire's southern army?" my father asked,

shifting his gaze to Graham.

"They should be ready to march soon. I estimate their number at two hundred thousand."

"T-Two hundred thousand?" Tina repeated, clinging to my right arm and trembling nervously. Her forelock hung limp.

"Th-That's too many," Ellie chimed in, stunned.

"The Yustinian Empire?" Celerian murmured in shock, the blood draining from her face.

I struggled to keep my inner turmoil from showing.

No, Stella. Tina and Ellie will worry if you panic too. You can cry when you're alone.

"The situation has changed," my father said, turning to the professor. "We need to crush them sooner than we planned."

"We'll make short work of them," the professor agreed. "The imperial troops are ill-supplied and poorly disciplined. How is the civilian evacuation going?"

"I've already informed the under-duke of Galois. We'll house most of the women, children, and elders on the outskirts of the northern capital. Shelley will oversee the move."

Shelley Walker was our head maid. She apparently had a military background, although I'd had no inkling of that until a few days earlier.

"Ha!" The professor slapped his knee. "No one in the kingdom handles logistics like 'the Mastermind'! I say we leave our rear echelon in her capable hands. Graham, what have you been up to?"

"For a start, I've been spreading rumors along the border that the Howards are intimidated by the size of the imperial army," Graham replied.

"An excellent plan," my father said slowly.

"Let them feel superior until the very last moment," added the professor.

All three men nodded. The looks on their faces were positively chilling.

Then, hesitantly, Celerian spoke up. "Mr. Allen entrusted me with an object to be given to Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard."

"Mr. Allen sent me something?" Tina repeated, wiping her eyes.

Celerian produced a clean, folded white handkerchief from an inner pocket and presented it to Tina. Her hand was shaking.

Tina took the handkerchief in both hands and unfolded it. "But why?" she asked, staring dazedly at the knight.

“Th-That’s the one you tied to Mr. Allen’s staff,” Ellie added, equally taken aback.

The parcel contained an azure ribbon.

“Mr. Allen untied the ribbons from his staff and left them with us when he stayed behind to guard our retreat,” Celerian explained, fighting back tears.

For a moment, Tina said nothing. Then fresh tears welled from her eyes, dripping onto the ribbon as she murmured, “He did?” Icy flowers began to whirl through the air.

Ellie and I threw our arms around her.

“Lady Tina...”

“Tina, calm down.”

“Why? Why?! Why wouldn’t he... Why wouldn’t Allen take me with him to the very end?!” Tina shouted, burying her face in my chest. For an instant, the azure ribbon glowed. As it did, the mark of the great spell Frigid Crane flashed on the back of her right hand, suppressing and dispelling her ice.

Could Mr. Allen have imbued it with magic to hold the great spell in check?

I exchanged a look and a nod with Ellie.

“Mr. Allen also left a message,” Celerian continued, her voice trembling. “‘Because Tina is certain to cry,’ he said.”

Tina looked at Celerian, her crumpled face silently urging the knight to continue.

Celerian straightened and recited, “‘Don’t rush. Keep calm and be careful. As long as you stick to that, I have faith you’ll be a match for anyone—even Lydia.’”

“I don’t believe it,” Tina sobbed. “Sir, how could you?”

Ellie and I murmured her name, and the three of us shared another hug.

“Well done, Ceynoth,” my father said. “Leave us, and spend your time here recuperating.”

With a slightly delayed “Yes, sir!” the lady knight withdrew from the room, looking deeply relieved.

While I stroked my weeping sister’s back, I looked down at the azure ribbon and then at the professor. He nodded slightly. I had been right about the pacifying spell formula.

“Stella, Ellie, I’m fine now,” Tina murmured, drying her eyes and stepping away from us. Then she tied the azure ribbon around her right wrist and resolutely declared, “Father, I have a request!

Please allow me to help at headquarters!” More flowers of ice filled the air, echoing her emotions, but there was nothing wild about these. They seemed almost sacred.

“Tina,” our father responded, “this is war we’re talking about.”

“I won’t go into battle. I can cast Blizzard Wolf, but I’m not ready for that yet. Mr. Allen wouldn’t approve.”

The supreme spell Blizzard Wolf was a powerful symbol of the Ducal House of Howard’s military might, alongside our secret art, the Azure Fists.

“And what do you hope to do at headquarters?” the professor interjected. He had already suggested placing Tina under Shelley’s command on a previous occasion.

“Forecast weather in the theater of war!” Tina replied. “And gather cars to move troops and supplies! I’ve already studied both during my agricultural research!”

“You covered all that?” I asked, bringing a hand to my mouth in surprise. Meanwhile, my father grunted, while the professor let out an impressed “Oho.”

“E-Excuse me!” Ellie raised her hand, looking determined. Then she bowed deeply and said, “I w-want to serve under the head maid too! Please let me!”

Graham’s eyes widened, then a smile spread across his face as he murmured, “Ellie taking the initiative? I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

Tina and Ellie stood up straight, waiting for my father’s verdict. After an extended pause, Duke Walter Howard gravely pronounced, “I approve your assignment to headquarters. Stella, you are to join them in—”

“I’ll fight on the front line in uniform,” I said before he could finish, looking him in the eye.

I doubt Mr. Allen would approve, but I know I’ll do more good there than in the rear echelon!

My father was the first to look away. “No.”

“Father! Why?!”

But he ignored my protest and addressed the gathering. “Professor, you’ll oversee the front with me. Graham, give the imperials sweet dreams. I leave the details to you. Tina, Ellie, make yourselves useful at headquarters.” He paused, then, “Stella, comfort the residents of southern Galois. This is a formal order from your duke.”

*

I stood on the bank of the majestic Lignier River, the boundary between the Duchy of Howard and Galois—and once our border with the Yustinian Empire. I glimpsed the Azure Dragon Mountains in the hazy distance, recalling that my father had once brought me here as a child.

"Never forget, Stella," he had said. "When the empire invaded a century ago, the Ducal House of Howard boldly gave them battle. And at Rostlay in southern Galois, our ancestors claimed the final victory."

I looked up at the sky. "This rain doesn't let up..." I muttered, adjusting my hood against the unseasonably cold summer downpour, which obscured my view of Twin Heavens Bridge—the only major bridge across the Lignier since before the War of the Dark Lord. Puddles formed in the road where the past few days' heavy traffic had damaged the paving stones. I needed to report these conditions to our headquarters in the northern capital and—

Someone raised an umbrella over my head. I turned to see a tall, blond, monocled young man hovering behind me. Roland Walker, my personal butler for the duration of summer break, was shielding me from the rain.

"Lady Stella, please wait in the carriage," he said. "All the residents may already have evacuated."

This was the third day since that awful report from the eastern capital. Tina and Ellie were at headquarters, which had been set up in my house's great council hall. My father and the professor were with our army in northern Galois, squaring off against the imperial forces. Graham's movements were enigmatic, but he seemed to be actively engaged in espionage. I, on the other hand...

"I'm fine, thank you," I responded. "Let's wait just a little longer. There might be stragglers, since the railroad only reaches to Seesehr, at the very southern edge of Galois, and the army is using it now."

"Very well, my lady." Roland withdrew with evident reluctance and began adjusting his monocle with his free left hand. I wondered if I had angered him. Still, having someone else hold my umbrella for me was just—

I felt a tightness in my chest as I remembered the day I'd shared an umbrella with Mr. Allen in the royal capital. I'd put on a bold

front for Tina and Ellie…but I was far weaker than either of them. In my heart of hearts, I wanted to drop everything and race to the eastern capital this instant! To rush to the aid of Mr. Allen, the magician who had saved me! And yet…I couldn't do it. A word from my father had barred me from even dressing for war, much less going out to fight. Under my raincoat, I still wore my Royal Academy uniform.

"Maybe all I'm good for is apologizing to the people while I hand out hot meals and rain gear or cast healing spells on the injured," I grumbled, hanging my head in regret.

"My lady—"

"Don't you believe it, Lady Stella!" a lively voice cried, cutting Roland's words short.

I looked up. "Mina."

The remonstrance had come from a maid about Ellie's height whose flaxen hair curled away from her face. She had turned twenty-one this year, if I recalled correctly, but she looked younger. Her name was Mina Walker, and she was the Howard Maid Corps's second-in-command, who led its combat team now that Shelley was retired from active duty. At present, she and a dozen or so other maids comprised my temporary guard.

Mina walked up to me, umbrella in hand. As she brushed Roland aside, she muttered something that I couldn't quite catch. ("Move it, and don't even think about getting all romantic under that umbrella. Lady Stella's new hairstyle should tell you she's not in the mood. You fail.") I thought I saw the maid's elbow dig into his solar plexus, but she ignored my staggering butler and beamed at me.

"The people all appreciate your devotion over these few days!" she exclaimed brightly. "They say they're honored to receive personal attention from Your Highness! Full marks!"

My homeland had four dukes, one each in the north, east, south, and west. While dukes of other nations were addressed as "Your Grace," members of our ducal houses were styled "Highness" in recognition of our role in founding the kingdom and blood ties to the royal family. That made me "Her Highness, Lady Stella Howard."

"Anyone could have done as much," I responded. "I hear Tina has already been all around the duchy."

Over the past few days, I had spoken to people throughout

southern Galois while I made my rounds, distributing food and treating the injured. And many of them had cheerfully asked after my sister.

"Is Lady Tina well?"

"Growing these new varieties of fruits and vegetables Lady Tina brought us makes life worth living."

"Those louts from the empire may wreck the fields, but we'll have them good as new in no time!"

My thoughts must have shown on my face, because Mina said encouragingly, "They all truly appreciate you! There's no doubt about that!"

"Thank you. It's good to see you again, even under these circumstances. I really mean that," I responded, reciprocating the maid's smile with just a hint of mischief.

A shiver ran the length of Mina's body and her flaxen hair. Her eyes widened as she clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh, L-Lady Stella, what a smile. A-Absolutely perfect marks."

Faster than my eyes could follow, the other maids darted forward to support her.

"Ma'am!"

"Oh no! Her heart can't take it."

"You warned us yourself about getting overexcited!"

I feel a little calmer knowing that our maids are still so chipper.

"I'm delighted to see you're enjoying yourself, Stella." A voice intruded on my thoughts. "Perhaps Walter needn't have worried."

We all turned back toward the bridge. The new arrival, a bespectacled man holding a black umbrella, was the...

"Professor?! I thought you were with my father."

"His Highness threatened me into looking in on you," he explained. "I hope he appreciates that covering such long distances is strenuous work. Mina, Roly, ladies, I beg your pardon, but would you excuse yourselves for a moment?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I can't agree to that. And I wish you wouldn't call me—"

Mina's knee drove into the pit of Roland's stomach.

"I see they haven't changed," the professor remarked, grinning as the maid corps's second-in-command dragged my butler away. "Now, Stella, I won't beat around the bush—Ohwin, the old capital, has fallen."

I was speechless. Ohwin was the largest city in northern Galois.

The imperial army was moving too fast, even considering that our forces were avoiding pitched battle.

The professor gave a slight nod. “The enemy is advancing more swiftly than expected. Their commander, Crown Prince Yugene, is either highly motivated or accompanied by an excellent staff. And given the state of their supplies, I suspect the imperial vanguard will soon split from the main force and make for their next target—perhaps the wealth of provisions stored at Meer in central Galois.”

There had been no backlash against the retreat, due in part to my house’s history of good governance in Galois. Even so, perhaps we should have stood our ground and fought.

“I discussed the matter with Walter, and we agreed to follow our original plan,” the professor continued. “Our army will retreat, guarding the civilian population, until the time is ripe for battle. Half of the under-duke’s forces are already encamped in Rostlay, constructing field fortifications.”

“Until the time is ripe”? What a convenient turn of phrase.

“Let me be blunt,” I said, looking the professor dead in the eye. “Does my father not trust me? Is that why he won’t explain the details of our strategy and forbade me to wear a military uniform or go anywhere near a battlefield?”

“You’re still just fifteen,” he responded. “A Leinster might go to war at that age, but—”

“Tina and Ellie are serving at headquarters.”

“But you would have refused an order to stay in the rear echelon, where it’s safe.”

He saw right through me.

Once, I had envied Tina’s, Ellie’s, and Lynne’s rapid growth and my best friend Caren’s talent. Seeing Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword in action had filled me with despair. I had panicked when Felicia, whom I’d seen as weak, turned out to be far stronger than me. I had resented my father for refusing to let me enroll in the Royal Academy, while the title “future Duchess Howard” had borne down on me like a weight.

But just when I’d been about to be crushed and had lost my way, I’d met Mr. Allen…and he’d saved me. I had reconciled—albeit awkwardly—with my father and returned to the north. I was stronger than before!

Or so I’d thought until just recently.

“Lady Tina Howard is a genius,” the professor said, abruptly

changing the subject. “Her name would have gone down in the annals of history even if she had never learned to cast a spell. Ellie Walker will grow to be the best and strongest of her line—I knew her late parents well. And Lady Lydia Leinster goes without saying. As long as she has Allen at her side, she can contend with anyone on earth.”

I couldn’t respond. It was all true.

“I’ll save my appraisals of the other young ladies for another occasion. Now, what of Lady Stella Howard? She’s gifted, but no genius. And she hasn’t earned the moniker ‘Lady of Ice.’ But consider, Stella: who is the finest sorcerer you know?”

“What? W-Well…” The first face that came to mind wore the most serene, tender smile. I had tearfully prayed for its owner’s safety every night since I’d received the dreadful tidings. Warmth filled my breast as I murmured, “Mr. Allen.”

“I’ve seen many sorcerers more gifted than him,” the professor responded. “But I don’t doubt he’ll become one of the greatest on the continent. Do you know why?”

Now this question, I can answer.

“Because he never, ever stops moving forward?”

The renowned sorcerer nodded approvingly. “You and Allen are much alike. I know you practice the new supreme spell and secret art he gave you and the other magic he inscribed in your notebook every morning and evening. That already makes you worthy of the Howard name.”

“Thank you,” I said slowly.

I was like Mr. Allen. The storm that had raged in my heart since I’d first learned of the rebellion—although I’d tried not to let it show—began to subside. What a simple woman I was.

And it’s absolutely, entirely your fault I ended up this way, Mr. Allen. Once this war is over and I’ve rescued you safe and sound…I insist *that you spoil me rotten.*

“Then I’ll work even harder from now on,” I said. “Remember, Caren and I plan to enroll in your department next year. I hope you’ll give us a warm reception.”

“Wait. Slow down. Don’t be hasty, Stella! A-Are you certain my department is truly the best fit for you? M-Many other accomplished researchers would—”

“What department did Mr. Allen graduate from? That’s where we want to go.”

The professor deliberately broke eye contact. “If you only knew how often I’ve heard those words in interviews these past few years. Would you like to know the department’s motto? ‘Obey Lydia without question. Revere Anko with all your heart. When Allen asks you for a favor, say only, “It would be my pleasure!”’ What happened to respect for *me*?!”

“That sounds delightful.” I giggled. “Now I’m even more eager to enroll.”

The professor gave me a look that seemed to demand what I found so funny. Then he broke into a broad grin. “Allen isn’t dead,” he assured me. “He returned those ribbons to Tina and Lydia because they’re unstable. Speaking of which, I believe he sent you a feather and a second notebook.”

“I get nervous without him, so I hope for even more of his attention,” I said, parrying the professor’s counterattack. I was well aware of my disposition, and I had no intention of changing it. Surely Tina and Lydia felt the same—

“What about Lydia?” I asked abruptly. “If that report reached the Leinsters as well, then she must be…”

“All the more reason why we’ve no time to lose,” the professor replied. “Unless we act soon, the royal and eastern capitals will be — Oh, it appears we may get some relief from this rain.”

Shafts of light broke through the lowering clouds. I could see people on the other side of the bridge.

“Well then, I should be getting back,” he continued. “But before I go, Stella, permit me to share a few magic words.”

“What words might those be?” I asked, puzzled. My heart felt much lighter. I thought I would find my answer soon.

The professor flashed a smile. “When you’re at a loss, just ask yourself: what would Allen do? Roly! Graham gave me a message for you: ‘You are hereby relieved of your duties as Lady Stella’s personal butler. Return to your calling as a Walker.’ Mina, you are now officially Stella’s bodyguard. Work hard, all of you!”

*

The next day found me at my house’s residence on the outskirts of the northern capital, amid the frenzy of our military headquarters. Butlers, maids, logistics officers, and representatives of our vassal houses filled the great hall, shouting back and forth

while they battled paperwork at their rows of desks. They processed magical and written reports from all quarters, ensuring that the colored game pieces on the massive raised-relief map in the center of the room reflected the latest military intelligence.

"This place may be orderly, but it's still a battlefield," I murmured as I entered with Mina. We had only just returned from three days in Galois.

Just then, I heard a stick strike the floor behind me.

"What a sight for sore eyes!" exclaimed a hale and hearty voice. "I'm glad I came over from the city. It's good to see you again, Lady Stella."

"Lord Ector!" I cried, turning to see a little old man in an azure uniform. He held a wooden staff, and his white hair and eyebrows made him seem as good-natured as he really was. Marquess Hubert Ector was a proven general whose house had long stood beside mine as defenders of the north.

"My grandchildren tell me of your exploits at the Royal Academy," he said, beaming at me. "The duke must be overjoyed."

"Oh, you give me too much credit."

In my father's eyes, I'm still a child.

A great, craggy boulder of a man, with close-cropped brown hair and a forbidding demeanor, followed the old marquess into the hall and silently inclined his head to us.

"Lord Brauner!" I exclaimed, raising a hand to my mouth.

"So you came after all, Steel," said Lord Ector, managing to widen just one eye.

"My troops are all in order, so I thought I'd see the famed Mastermind at her work," the man—Marquess Jabbok "Steel" Brauner—responded without evident interest. When it came to defensive battles, no other commander in the kingdom could match him.

I resumed walking, motioning with my hand and eyes for both lords to follow. The workers noticed our arrival, but none paused to acknowledge it. They were under orders to ignore etiquette—maintaining supply lines and keeping the army abreast of the latest developments demanded their full attention.

Both marquesses let out appreciative exclamations when we reached the center of the hall and they saw the topographical model of the battlefield.

"It was my sister's idea," I informed them. "She said that

holding all this in her mind was ‘just impossible.’”

The map encompassed all the terrain from the south of the Yustinian Empire to the outskirts of our royal capital. It modeled mountains, rivers, marshes, lakes, and ravines, along with all we knew of current weather conditions. Rails and roads crossed its surface, marked with the numbers of trains, griffins, and wyverns in service. I even saw little model cars on the southern edge of Galois. Pieces marked the number and position of troops on both sides of the conflict, and most of these bore their commanding officers’ names on tiny flags. Graham and his spies were apparently well on their way to laying our enemies bare.

Lord Ector honored the display with a heartfelt “Most intelligible,” while Lord Brauner expressed his admiration with a more subdued “Precise work on such short notice.”

“Oh! Stella!” came a happy cry from up ahead. “Welcome back!”

“L-Lady Stella!” another chimed in.

Smiles showed on every nearby face as Tina and Ellie waved enthusiastically from the back of the hall, where they occupied the end seats at a row of three desks. I waved back more discreetly, noting the azure ribbon tied around Tina’s left wrist.

Behind the center desk sat a bespectacled woman nearing old age. Shelley “the Mastermind” Walker, my house’s head maid and the kingdom’s finest logistician, had let her hair down and donned an old azure military uniform.

“Welcome home, Lady Stella,” she said, looking up. “Lords Ector and Brauner, I have been appointed chief logistics officer for the duration of this crisis. Please let me know if I may be of service.”

“It’s good to be back, Shelley,” I responded.

“I’ve nothing but praise for the Mastermind’s work,” Lord Ector added, followed a moment later by a gruff “Appreciated” from Lord Brauner.

Her desk was heaped high with documents. Moving armies of tens of thousands required mountains of both matériel and paperwork. Even as we spoke, Shelley’s eyes raced over a succession of forms. She rapidly judged and signed each document before hurling it into a box labeled “approved,” “rejected,” or “deferred.” Beside her, Ellie murmured, “Th-This one goes, um...here,” as she added fresh papers to her own piles. The speed of their desk work

beggared belief!

The marquesses were dumbfounded.

After a moment, Lord Ector shifted his attention to my sister. “And what might you be doing, Lady Tina?”

“Forecasting the weather over Galois and the duchy,” she replied, her forelock waving as she stood up. “And a bit of logistics work—I’m gathering up cars from all the houses!”

“The weather?” Lord Ector repeated, his features a mix of curiosity and appreciation. “Well, I’ll be.”

Predicting the weather remained a challenge, even in this age of widespread magic, trains, and automobiles. Numerous scholars in our kingdom’s history had attempted it…without success. Yet my little sister, who hadn’t even been able to cast a spell until a few months ago, was performing that nigh-impossible feat for the whole Duchy of Howard—including Galois—and performing it perfectly. Her forecasts were a boon to everything from evacuation efforts to troop movements and supply transport.

“Before I applied to the Royal Academy, my tutor made a mock exam for me,” Tina said, smiling as she fingered the azure ribbon on her wrist. “He drew on centuries of test questions to predict what would be on the real one. Collating a few decades of weather reports and making forecasts is nothing next to that! Besides, I’ve been gathering this data for ages! I even had models ready, since I always wanted to try it on the whole duchy someday!”

The marquesses froze, stunned into silence. Tina had no idea of her own brilliance. She may have researched weather before, but reviewing the past several decades of reports and deriving predictions from them in such a short time was still a superhuman feat.

“I think Ellie’s a lot weirder than I am!” Tina added, with a malicious look at her personal maid.

Ellie yelped and protested, “L-Lady Tina? I r-really don’t think…” But despite her surprise, she kept steadily sorting through her heap of papers. And though it seemed like simple work at first glance, looks could be deceiving.

I approached Ellie’s desk and glanced over the documents on it. They truly ran the gamut: supplies of all types and quantities, storage locations, railroad service, incidence and causes of illnesses and injuries, the morale and health of troops, summaries of imperial news reports… The list went on. And Ellie barely looked at each of

them before sorting it into its appropriate box. When a box filled up, she passed its contents to Shelley.

"She's keeping pace with the head maid," Mina murmured, awestruck. "Full marks, Miss Walker."

“Ellie,” Lord Ector said slowly, “wherever did you learn to do that?”

“H-Hello, milord!” Ellie replied. “I’m j-just applying the way Mr. Allen taught me to activate spells. All the textbooks say how difficult it is to cast multiple spells at the same time, but he showed Lady Tina and me otherwise when he made pretty flowers of all eight elements bloom together. So I thought that maybe I could do more than one job at the same time too.”

The marquesses couldn’t believe their ears.

“*All* eight elements?”

“Simultaneously?”

The maids and logisticians from outside our main house paused in their work, equally taken aback.

“Lady Tina and I learned a lot from Mr. Allen,” Ellie chirped, beaming with pride. “I can make seven flowers now, although Lady Tina still struggles to get even one right.”

“What?!” Tina snapped. “I…I can do it when I have a mind to!”

“Y-Your ice flowers nearly demolished the greenhouse last time you tried!”

Tina let out a frustrated groan. She and Ellie went on bantering as they worked, oblivious to the awestruck gazes on them.

The marquesses and Mina looked drawn. I overheard them muttering, “Seven elements?” “At one time?” and “But the greenhouse has such sturdy barriers.”

I felt my heart weighed down with just the slightest tinge of jealousy. I could probably make a good attempt at predicting the weather based on old records, and I felt confident that I could process paperwork at a good clip. I’d even managed to make five flowers bloom. But Tina had immediately suggested the forecast and made it a reality, while Ellie put her own skills to use assisting Shelley. I, on the other hand, had merely gone about comforting the people on my father’s orders. Once again, I felt overshadowed by my little sisters’—

Suddenly, I recalled what Mr. Allen had said to me in the café with the sky-blue roof: “You don’t have to think about doing everything yourself.” His words—and his kind smile—came back to me, clear as day.

That’s right. I don’t need to do everything alone. These are my

sisters, not my enemies, and I couldn't be more proud of them.

I walked up to Tina and Ellie. Then I reached out and gently stroked their heads, eliciting a baffled "St-Stella? U-Um..." and "Oh, B-Big Sis Stella" in response.

"Aren't my sisters amazing?" I said. "I hope you'll all remember them when the war is over."

Laughter rose on all sides, and work resumed.

I withdrew my hands and turned to the marquesses. "What stratagems do you believe my father will employ in this campaign?"

Both men answered gravely, their astonishment replaced by the gravitas of seasoned officers.

"We merely obey his orders."

"I don't question Howard the War God."

My father must have shared his plans with his chief vassals, Shelley, and key officers of his army. So, he wants me to work out the answer for myself.

I studied the map, refreshing my knowledge of the military situation. True to the professor's prediction, the imperial army had split into two groups, and their vanguard was rapidly advancing south. And at present, only my father's forces and those of the under-duke stood against them in Galois. Although my father had ordered a general mobilization of the northern houses, his only command thus far had been to assemble outside the northern capital. Where was that warlike spirit he'd shown when he'd hurled defiance at the imperial ambassador? Even our main force seemed rooted to its position in southern Galois, on the old battlefield of Rostlay.

What would Mr. Allen do?

Suddenly, a gathering of cars caught my eye.

"Tina, if I read this map correctly, father ordered every available car to Seesehr—near the railroad terminal," I said. "And he's asked you to devote special attention to weekly forecasts of weather patterns between the northern capital and Rostlay. Do I have that right?"

"Yes, that's right," Tina replied, puzzled. "Arrangements for the cars are already complete...but he thinks we can only make one concerted push with them, since the technology is so unreliable. He made an odd request about the weather too: he wants me to pinpoint days when there will be mist over southern Galois but no rainfall."

“Thank you. Shelley, how much matériel have we stockpiled in the northern capital?”

“Enough to supply all the armies of the north for three months of combat operations,” Shelley answered matter-of-factly. “We are prepared to transport it at a moment’s notice.”

Three months? That’s too much for a war within our borders.

I began to glimpse the grand design that my father and Graham were devising:

- Despite his bellicose words to the ambassador, my father continued to retreat without giving battle.
- He had mobilized the northern houses yet held their armies in reserve around our capital.
- The railroad only ran as far as Seesehr, on the southern edge of Galois.
- This time of year was generally rainy—and often misty as well.

Of course! Defense in depth! He’s using all of Galois to draw the enemy into a decisive battle! And he’ll fight that battle at…

I silently pointed to Rostlay. Shelley and the marquesses raised their eyebrows.

“But Stella, Rostlay isn’t prone to mist,” Tina objected, blinking in surprise.

“I th-think the bigger army might have an advantage there,” Ellie added uncomfortably.

The imperial invaders numbered two hundred thousand to our thirty thousand allied troops in Galois. Rostlay was mostly level plain, except for a central hill and a small river in the south—perfect terrain for a large army to deploy on. A pitched battle there would assuredly end in our defeat. However…

“Quite right,” I told Tina and Ellie, raising my left index finger and feeling like a teacher. “But what if that’s just what father and the professor *want* the imperial army to think? You know, ‘The Howards’ bark is worse than their bite; we can beat them in the field.’ I’m certain Graham is pitching in to spread that sentiment too.”

“Then, father and the professor planned all this?” Tina whispered, wide-eyed.

“A-And my grandpa too?” Ellie chimed in, equally astonished.

Now I understand how Mr. Allen feels—they look adorable when they're surprised. Still, I wonder if I'm always giving him looks like this too. I'd be so embarrassed…and a little bit happy.

"Well done!" Lord Ector exclaimed, breaking into a grin. "The god of war has a worthy heir!"

"Did you receive your military education at the Royal Academy?" asked Lord Brauner.

"No," I replied. "I've read a few military histories, but no more."

"Then how did you decipher the duke's plan?"

I smiled at the battle-hardened marquesses. "It's all thanks to my private tutor."

I recalled the royal capital as we'd seen it together that night.

Mr. Allen, you told me then that you want to see Tina's and Lydia's futures. Well, I want to see yours. Maybe not right at your side—I don't have the confidence for that yet—but as close to you as I can possibly be.

Two miffed little noises alerted me to the disgruntled looks I was getting from Tina and Ellie. Then they stood up and pressed toward me.

"St-Stella! I…I'm Mr. Allen's first student! Me!" Tina insisted with all the vehemence she could muster. "You're, um… Me, Ellie, Lynne… Fourth! You're fourth!"

"A-And don't forget me," Ellie added. "I…I'm, um, well…"

"Don't worry," I said, chuckling. "I know."

"Humph! Wh-When you take it like that, you make it seem like we're being…u-unreasonable," Tina grumbled, looking just a little ashamed of herself.

"I'm so glad I get to take Mr. Allen's lessons with you, Lady Stella!" Ellie chirped.

"Ellie, you traitor!"

"Y-You're the only one who ever said otherwise, L-Lady Tina."

And with that, my sisters were back to their usual antics.

I've made up my mind—I need to keep them safe while Mr. Allen's away!

I stood up straight, then bowed deeply to the marquesses. Both men called my name in confusion, as did Tina and Ellie.

I don't have Caren's brilliance or Felicia's strength. I may be the weakest and least talented girl in Mr. Allen's orbit. Even so, I want to keep doing the best I can and forging ahead, just like he does. I'll press

on to the royal and then the eastern capital, never doubting that Mr. Allen and Caren are there waiting for me!

"Lord Ector, Lord Brauner," I said. "Would you advise my father that Stella Howard's presence on the battlefield would be good for morale? I am the future Duchess Howard, and I *will* go to the front —without his permission, if need be. Shelley, please find me a uniform."

*

The moon shone down on the burning warehouses of Pholoe, a port city southeast of the Duchy of Leinster and at the southernmost tip of the Principality of Bazel.

"I believe that's all of them," I, Lynne Leinster, muttered to myself as I wheeled my griffin through the night sky. "We must take care to keep collateral damage to a minimum."

Amid the rising fire, smoke, and enemy flares, more than a dozen griffins dove in rapid succession. The maids astride their backs launched a myriad of offensive spells, adding to the fruits of our attack.

Ten days had flown by since the Ducal House of Algren had launched its rebellion and sparked a war between my house and the League of Principalities in the process. We had since met the principalities of Atlas and Bazel in battle on the Avasiek Plain, decimating their forces in a historic victory. And at present—

From the wharf below, enemy soldiers assailed me with a volley of the elementary spell Divine Water Arrow. My griffin immediately screeched in response, conjuring a wall of wind magic to deflect the watery salvo.

"Climb higher, Lady Lynne!" a maid's voice sounded from the black clip in my hair. "You *know* you're not allowed to fight land battles."

"You're hardly one to talk, Lily. I know you're on a rampage down there," I answered the Leinster Maid Corps's number three as I maneuvered my griffin to a higher altitude.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, my dear mother had informed us of a fearsome plan: a campaign of aerial assaults on the five northern principalities' harbors, bridges, highways, storehouses, and merchant shipping. We would commit an army of griffins to these far-reaching raids—surely a first in the annals of military

history!

Ever since, we had spent our days striking at targets all over the map—though, as a rule, we were forbidden to land, and only two of us were fighting below at present.

Lily's long scarlet hair gleamed as she leapt on the group of soldiers who had just fired at me. One flash of her greatsword broke their line and sent them tumbling into the sea.

"Whew! That was a good night's work!" I heard her proclaim over my communication orb as she thrust her massive blade into the ground and swelled with pride. She wore not a military uniform but her usual long skirt and jacket ensemble in shades of pale scarlet. She hadn't even bothered with a breastplate.

Just then, another enemy unit—this one composed of fully armored knights—advanced on the maid. There were around fifty of them, and their heavy plate, long pikes, and massive shields marked them as Bazelian regulars!

"Lily!" I cried. "Fall ba—"

"But I've still got a little rampaging left in me," the maid remarked, slinging her greatsword over her shoulder and sinking into a crouch before she resumed her charge.

The knights were visibly disconcerted, having evidently not expected an unarmored girl to rush straight at them. Too disorganized to form a wall of spears, they launched water spells individually. But their every blow bounced off flowers of fire—some of Lily's favorite magic.

In a flash, the maid had entered striking distance, bringing her sword around in a great horizontal sweep. The knights' consternation as they regarded their broken armaments was palpable, even from my aerial vantage point.

The Leinster Maid Corps was a strict meritocracy. Naturally, its number three was a force to be reckoned with.

Down below, Lily let out a whoop as she continued her assault with effortless, one-handed swings of her massive blade. In no time at all, she had cleaved her way through yet another enemy formation.

She certainly is incredible.

Flaming plumes whirled as I drew my own sword and launched a spell at the enemy forces. I caught screams of "Look there!" and "F-F-Firebird!" from below and saw the soldiers throw up fire-resistant barriers. But their defenses were meaningless in the face of

the supreme fire spell—it tore through one barrier after another, then banked sharply just before striking our foe and burst in midair. Nearby buildings burst into flames, blocking further attacks on us. I'd learned this trick with Firebird from my dear brother's notebook.

"I worked up a good sweat!" Lily declared, pretending to wipe her brow. "Don't swoop in to hog the spotlight, Lady Lynne! It's not *fair*!"

I shrugged. But before I could respond, a pillar of fire rose deeper into the harbor. Several scorched masts flew through the air and came crashing down onto the wharf and sea in a shower of flame. The airborne maids and I were struck speechless.

W-Was that...?

I tugged on my griffin's bridle, urging it to fly lower.

"No, Lady Lynne!" Lily snapped, serious for a change. "Everyone, stand by in midair!"

I ignored the order and leapt off onto the ground.

"Lady Lynne!" she called again, racing over to me.

"I'm going with you, Lily," I said. "That fire must be—"

Another roar drowned out my words. I spied several large sailing ships sinking amid a sinister inferno.

Lily glared at me for a moment, then broke into a rueful grin. "What an impossible young lady you are."

"Oh?" I responded. "And what are you then, Lady Lily Leinster?"

This tall, buxom maid shared my surname. She was my cousin—the eldest daughter of the under-duke who ruled the former principalities of Etna and Zana, south of the main Duchy of Leinster.

"Oooh!" Lily fumed, pouting. "I'm a maid! A maid!"

"Yes, yes," I said. "Now, get moving! My dear sister won't wait!"

We took off along the wharf. As I'd seen from above, most of our targets were already cinders. Still, why had my dear mother forbidden us to strike any warehouses or ships not on the list? I couldn't make sense of the order.

Soon, I was close enough for a clear view of the carnage. Of the more than twenty ships I'd seen floating at anchor, all but one or two were sinking. And it was all the work of one person—a young woman in a jet-black uniform with short, rough-cropped scarlet hair. With a sword in each hand and eight wings of dusky fire on

her back, she was squaring off against roughly a hundred enemy knights arrayed along the waterfront. Her name was Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and she was my dear elder sister.

"What...What in blazes *are* you?!" bellowed an officer from the front of the enemy line.

My dear sister did not reply. She looked down at the scarlet ribbon tied to her right wrist and murmured, "I've worked hard, you know? Isn't this enough for tonight?"

"Prepare to engage!" the officer barked. "Don't think about conserving mana!"

"Yes, sir!" The ranks of enemy soldiers began weaving spells for all they were worth.

"No!" I screamed.

"Fire!" The officer swung down his sword. More than a hundred offensive spells flew toward my dear sister...and disintegrated, sliced apart by a flurry of dark-crimson sword strokes. Her burning wings had morphed into a cluster of blades.

My dear sister slowly raised her swords, their blades alight with an eerie blend of black and crimson. But her mind was not on the foes before her.

"Yes, I can end it now," she said to her ribbon. "You'd better give me heaps of praise for this later...Allen."

"R-Retrea—"

Before the shaken officer could finish shouting, my dear sister listlessly swung her swords.

"Lady Lynne!" Lily cried, springing in front of me and forming her flowers into a fiery barrier.

There came a flash of light, a rumble like thunder, and a sharp gust of wind. Then the shock wave hit, kicking up clouds of dust and flame. I hid my face and shrieked in spite of myself.

When, at last, the uproar subsided, I fearfully surveyed my surroundings and whispered, "Wh-What on earth?"

Every ship and warehouse in the path of the Scarlet Sword was sliced neatly in two and engulfed in fire. The baleful tongues of reddish-black flame reminded me of thorn-covered serpents—like embers of the taboo spell Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend, which my dear sister had unleashed at Avasiek.

Amid the devastation, the Bazelian knights simply cowered on the ground, clutching their heads and trembling. How were none of them dead?!

The wings of fire vanished from my dear sister's back as she sheathed her swords. Without turning to look at us, she clutched her stopped pocket watch and said flatly, "It's over. We're leaving."

I wanted to say something to her...but I hadn't the courage. Lily seemed to be struggling as well.

My dear sister ignored us and began walking along the street. The mark of the great spell Blazing Qilin shone on the back of her right hand, and the scarlet ribbon on her wrist was clearly more burnt than it had been when my dear brother had sent it back to her just a few days before.

Lily and I had just turned to follow her when the enemy commander screamed at our backs:

"Devil. Devil! Fire devil!"

The knights took up the cry and began to deploy the strongest spells they could muster. I quivered with rage, but before I could respond in kind, a hand motioned me to stop.

"Dear sister?"

"I don't mind being a devil," she said. "I'll gladly be anything as long as he's safe."

"Fire!" the officer roared again. "Strike the devil! Slay the Fire Fiend!"

The knights unleashed another barrage of water magic.

"I just want to go save him," my dear sister muttered under her breath. "And if you get in my way..." She hugged her pocket watch and roared, "I'll incinerate every! Last! One of you!"

Serpentine briars of flame sprang up around her, and the watery barrage blinked out of existence. A dusky-crimson, eight-winged Firebird took shape over the street. Parts of it were breaking off and falling to the ground as thorny snakes, which spread the blaze.

Th-This isn't my dear sister's magic! Lydia Leinster's Firebird could never be so dreadful!

The enemy force panicked. Knights sank to the ground or turned and fled.

"Lady Lydia," Lily called, "please release your spell. There's no one left to fight."

There was a long pause before my dear sister muttered, "I suppose." She dispelled her Firebird and resumed walking.

I gripped my sword painfully tight and gritted my teeth. *Dear brother, what…what should I do?*

"Lydia," Lily murmured forlornly, "Allen would be heartbroken if he saw you now."

I gazed up at the sky. Fire and smoke blotted out the stars.

*

Early the next morning, I landed my griffin before the entrance of the main Leinster residence in the southern capital. Grooms raced to meet us. I gave the griffin that had fought alongside me these past few days a gentle pat on the neck and a "Thank you" before leaving it in their care and making for the front door.

"Finally," I said with a sigh, "I can take a bath."

"Well, well, well! Just the moment I've been waiting for! Today's the day we soak in the tub together like—"

"You're not invited, Lily," I added, with a withering glance at the scarlet-haired maid dogging my footsteps.

"Oh, come ooon! Let me join you! It'll be just like when you were little!" Lily whined, making a scene. Her antics shook her ample chest—much to my irritation.

While we were occupied in pointless chatter, a black-uniformed beauty strode past us.

"D-Dear sister!" I called frantically. "Would you like, um, a bath, and maybe something to eat?"

"Send some water and a cloth to my room later," she replied, her voice devoid of emotion. "I don't need food. Don't let anyone bother me until we know our next target or receive fresh news from him."

I started to reach for her retreating back…then withdrew my hand. "All right," I said.

A petite young woman with chestnut-brown hair greeted my

dear sister at the door. Maya Mato, the Leinster Maid Corps's former number three, had returned to duty in this time of crisis. Our eyes met, and I bobbed my head.

Please do your best for her.

The pair vanished into the house, and Lily, the maids, and I let out our breath. I hadn't been able to manage more than the most impersonal conversation with my dear sister since before the Battle of Avasiek, I reflected sullenly.

But almost immediately, a maid in training with her brown hair in pigtails and a dark-skinned maid whose spectacles and short black hair became her beautifully emerged to greet us.

"Lady Lynne!" cried my personal attendant for the summer, flinging her arms around me. She looked pale.

"Sida," I said, "don't tell me you've been waiting up all night?"

"I was praying to the Great Moon," she admitted sheepishly. "I'm so glad you're all right." With that, the girl a year my senior began to cry.

"Welcome home, Lady Lynne," said the black-haired maid—Romy, the corps's second-in-command. "I'm delighted to see you safe and sound."

"Thank you, Romy," I responded. "How is everyone?"

"Well. They all badger me for more battles to fight."

Romy and her fellow maids had been raiding major ports and roads in the Principality of Atlas under the direct command of my dear mother, "the Bloodstained Lady," Lisa Leinster.

"And you're the most bloodthirsty of the lot," Lily muttered under her breath.

"Did you say something, *Lady* Lily?" asked Romy.

"I'm not a l-lady; I'm a maid! A maid!" Lily protested—in vain. This was such an everyday occurrence that no one paid her any mind.

"The mistress and master have already returned, although they won't stay long," Romy informed us. "Lady Lynne, report to the council hall before you do anything else—Emma has been asking for you. It concerns Miss Fosse."

Emma was the maid corps's number four, assigned to Allen & Co., our joint business venture with the Ducal House of Howard. And just a few days earlier, she had fought her way back here from the royal capital.

Felicia Fosse was a physically frail girl. Once my upperclassman

at the Royal Academy, she currently served as Allen & Co.'s head clerk.

"Very well," I said. "Sida, let go of me. Oh, and let me return your insignia. Thank you."

"You're welcome, my lady," the trainee said, still sobbing, as I gave her back her pendant.

Then, I smiled at the maids who had accompanied us on the raid. "Thank you all! Take a nice, long rest—you've earned it," I said. "Shall we leave Lily at home next time?"

"Let's!" came the chorus of replies.

"Lady Lynne!" Lily protested. "And the rest of you too! Y-You're all awful! S-Simply shocking!"

Her tantrum finally brought smiles back to all our faces. I was thankful for her sunny disposition, although I would never say so—it would go straight to her head!

"My dear sister seems even worse than before," I whispered to Romy.

"I'll check in on her," the maid whispered back. "The mistress entrusted me with a message for you: 'Come to Liam's office once you're done in the council hall. Bring Lily.'"

I stepped away from her and acquiesced with a wink. Then I turned to the teary-eyed trainee and my cousin, who was doodling in the dirt with her finger.

"Come along, Sida, Lily! We have places to be!"

*

"Are the train lines and storehouses still backed up?! Fresh produce will rot at the stations!"

"Help! Every house is begging for a place on the front line!"

"Griffins and wyverns will die if we push them too hard. And remember: the southern front isn't our primary concern. Be careful!"

"Three hot meals a day, even on the front line! Do you realize Howard troops get that, afternoon tea, *and* a midnight snack?!"

General headquarters had descended into mayhem. Leinster maids and logisticians, along with the brightest minds that the other southern houses could offer, were racing in and out of the council hall and shouting orders at each other, their eyes bloodshot as they contended with reams of paperwork. Utter chaos prevailed.

“I d-don’t know if I’m up to this,” Sida whimpered, letting out a frightened squeal as she clutched my left arm.

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised,” Lily remarked. She seemed to find the spectacle amusing.

“Oh, Lynne, Lily,” called our grandfather, Leen Leinster, looking up from his paperwork and waving from his desk at the back of the hall. He seemed as serene as ever.

“Dear grandfather, I’ve returned,” I reported, echoed by Lily’s exuberant “We just got back!”

“Welcome home,” he responded. “It’s good to see you safe and sound.”

“Dear grandfather, I was told I’d find Felicia here. Have you seen her?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Miss Fosse is right there.” He gestured with his left hand.

I turned to look where he pointed and found myself at a loss.

“A m-mountain of paper?” Sida asked, equally baffled.

Lily groaned.

A short distance away sat a large office desk surmounted by a towering heap of documents. And above the pile, I could just barely glimpse...

“Bangs?” Sida and I murmured in unison. Tied-up tufts of pale-chestnut and pale-scarlet hair swayed side by side.

What on earth...?

I looked back at my dear grandfather, who gently urged me along. “Ask Emma for the details,” he said. “She tells me only you can do the task she needs done.”

“I...I see.” I nodded, then approached the desk and peered around the heaped papers. What I saw there made me sigh. “What do you think you’re doing, Felicia? And you too, Sasha?”

Sida followed my remark with a broken exclamation of pure astonishment. Lily, meanwhile, pouted as she never had before.

“Oh, Lynne.” Felicia greeted me languidly, looking up from her papers.

“Welcome home, Lady Lynne,” Sasha added in the same weak tone. Both their faces were ghastly pale from lack of sleep.

Sida gave them a bewildered look. “O Great Moon,” she said, “why are they both wearing maid uniforms?”

Felicia Fosse was wearing a Leinster maid uniform, and her bangs were tied up to reveal her forehead. The same went for Sasha

Sykes, the fiancée of my dear brother Richard and the second daughter of Earl Sykes, my house's spymaster. Why they were dressed this way, I couldn't fathom.

"May I ask you something, Felicia?" I ventured.

"Yes?" the bespectacled older girl replied sleepily.

What is this adorable, bosomy creature?! It's not fair!

Before I could pull myself together and ask my question, Lily wailed, "Why are you dressed like maiiids?! I demand an explanation!"

"U-Um... W-Well, you see..." Felicia mumbled, flustered, then let out a little squeak and fainted.

"Miss Fosse!" cried one of two maids who had been frantically sorting documents nearby and now raced to Felicia's side. This was Emma, our maid corps's number four, whose gorgeous black hair complemented her good looks.

"We told you to take some rest," added the other—Sally Walker, a bespectacled Howard maid whose blonde hair stopped at her ears.

I stood on tiptoe and gave the top of Lily's head a whack with the edge of my hand.

"Ow! Violence isn't the answer," she whined.

"Felicia is shy!" I snapped. "What were you thinking, scaring her at your first meeting?!"

Honestly, the nerve of this maid!

Emma and Sally joined me in shooting icy looks at Lily while they tended to Felicia, but to no apparent effect. I shrugged, turned to Sasha, and said, "What's going on here?"

"Felicia and I currently serve under Former Duke Leen Leinster's direct command," Sasha replied. "Our duties are to analyze developments within the League of Principalities and devise plans of sabotage."

"You're in charge of all that?!" I asked, stunned. Then, slowly, "Anna said that she would temporarily give you all the authority vested in my dear brother, didn't she?"

"She did. We can move any amount of money we please, short of sums that would sink the fortunes of the House of Leinster."

I recalled our head maid, who was away on a reconnaissance mission to the royal and eastern capitals. I hoped that she was well—infiltrating the eastern capital would be a challenge, even for her.

"And the maid uniforms?" I asked.

“We needed a change of clothes!” Sasha replied, sinking into an unoccupied chair. “And Cordelia said Lord Richard would approve!”

I shifted my gaze to the noblewoman’s left. There sat a stunning woman with long blonde hair, gleaming gold-and-silver eyes, and skin as white as snow—the maid corps’s number eight, Cordelia.

“The young ladies refused to stop work, even for a rest or a change of clothes,” she said, frowning slightly. “I resorted to falsehoods out of necessity.”

“Cordelia?!” Sasha cried. “You mean Lord Richard *isn’t* fond of maid uniforms?!”

“I believe deception is sometimes necessary. And you look charming,” the maid crowed, with a smile so elegant it seemed almost noble.

“Cordeliaaa,” Lily interjected, breaking her silence with a resentful growl, “I want a maid uniform too!”

Yikes!

Sida cowered behind me, but Cordelia met the challenge head-on. “Lily, those clothes you’re wearing are formal maid attire in a land far to the east.”

“Really?” Lily asked after a moment of mistrustful silence. “You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“I’ve never been anything but honest with you, Lily!”

“Hmmm...”

While Lily brooded, Cordelia stuck her tongue out in such a way that only I would notice. What good friends they were.

Felicia groaned as wind magic fanned her back to consciousness.

“Good morning,” I said. “Felicia, what did the maids say to get you into that outfit?”

“Huh?” she responded, nonplussed.

“I demand answers!”

“Emma said that Allen likes maid uniforms, so— Oh!”

“I see,” I said slowly, fixing Felicia with a reproachful stare.

“I-It’s not what you think!” she protested, flustered. “I d-don’t have any spare clothes here, so it was th-this or nothing.”

“We plan to add beast ears and a fluffy tail once the war dies down!” Emma chimed in.

“Mr. Allen won’t be able to hold out long then,” added Sally. Both maids sounded as though they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Felicia blushed furiously and covered her face with her hands. Once again, I was forced to acknowledge her charms. And she was looking beyond the war.

I sat in an empty chair and looked Allen & Co.'s head clerk in the eye. "Felicia, please fill me in on the situation."

"Of course," she responded. "Emma, Sally, help me up."

"Certainly, miss." The pair lifted Felicia onto her feet—meaning that she had difficulty so much as standing on her own. For a moment, the maids' eyes met mine. Their message was clear: "We want her to rest."

Oblivious to our unspoken exchange, the head clerk approached her desk and pointed to the map spread across its center, which showed the theater of war. It reminded me of the chart my dear brother had shown us in the royal capital, before we had left for the east.

"The white pins are allies, and the black ones, enemies," Sida speculated, wide-eyed. "Red pins are cities, roads, and bridges we've already attacked, and the blue ones are targets we haven't hit yet. Do I have that right? I c-can't believe you make it all so clear at a glance."

"I modeled it on Allen's maps," Felicia said, with an ever-so-slightly smug smile. "I wish I could have projected it in three dimensions, though."

"Maintaining a constant projection proved difficult," Emma supplied. "Few but the head maid can produce one at all."

"We hope to eventually make up some of the difference using scale models," added Sally.

Felicia gave me a grave look. "I don't understand military matters. In fact, there's only one thing I *do* know something about." She fished in one of her pockets and dropped a gold coin onto the desk—currency from the league. "And this is it. Sasha's managed to break almost every code the league uses in its magical communications. And even after that first battle, the principalities haven't lost the will to fight. So—"

"You sent out griffin riders to harry their ports, roads, storehouses, and shipping," Lily cut in brightly. A wicked grin spread over her face as she studied the map. "And you made a point to leave a few wealthy merchants, officials, and a certain principality untouched."

I checked the map too and saw that the distribution of

remaining blue pins was indeed suspicious. Was their plan to sow suspicion within the league even as we cut off its trade routes?!

"I can't ride off to battle," Felicia said, her expression resolute. "But Allen put his trust in me, so I have to live up to his expectations! I want to help him as soon as I possibly can!"

I found myself reflecting that she might be the strongest of us.

"We've nearly finished buying up all the wheat along the borders of Atlas and Bazel," Emma said, taking up the explanation. "The only grain left is in the warehouses of a few wealthy northern merchants, whom we've kept off our list of targets. According to our intelligence, wheat prices in both principalities are through the roof. What shall we do next, Miss Fosse?"

"Y-You've been manipulating markets on top of everything else?!" I exclaimed, utterly shocked.

"This is my main job, if anything," Felicia replied, giving me a puzzled look. To Emma, she said, "We'll sell, of course—at below the going rate. And..." She adjusted her spectacles slightly with a finger and smiled. The look on her face was wicked—positively sinister, in fact—and something about it reminded me of my dear brother when he was being mean. "We'll vary our prices. Sell grain a little cheaper in Bazel than in Atlas, and only to civilians. And when we make a sale...someone might let slip the names of those merchants sitting on huge stockpiles."

"I see." Emma paused to consider. "That should wreak havoc on grain markets throughout the league, put the screws to the merchants hoarding their stock, and provoke mistrust between Atlas and Bazel. I'll see to it at once."

"Allen's education at work!" Lily quipped, nodding. She was clearly enjoying this.

Sasha murmured, "Why, Miss Fosse, how simply dreadful," forgetting that her own activities were just as frightening.

I looked at Sida and felt relieved to see her stunned into silence.

Then I heard a loud guffaw. Unbeknownst to me, my dear grandfather had joined us and now stood nearby with a hand on his chin. "What a plan," he said. "Miss Fosse, I'd like the benefit of your opinion: On what terms would you end this war?"

"Huh? What?! U-Um..."

Felicia panicked and turned to Sasha, but Earl Sykes's daughter exclaimed, "Now, I really *must* crack that eastern cipher today! Father's been too caught up in frontline espionage to be any help at

all. He's letting his admiration for Walker 'the Abyss' run away with him!" Her every gesture screamed that she was hard at work as she slipped out of the conversation.

The bespectacled head clerk looked to Emma and Sally next, but the maids shielded themselves with paperwork. In her last extremity, she stammered my name, pleading for help.

Naturally, I clenched my fists and signaled that I wished her luck.

"I…I'm not at all qualified to speak on such matters," Felicia told my dear grandfather in a last-ditch effort.

"I hear that you earned Allen's respect," he responded. "So, your opinions are as good as his."

Felicia fell silent for a moment. At last, she said, “I would make only one demand, and it would be aimed at the Principality of Bazel.”

“And Atlas? We’re winning this war; even annexation is a possibility.”

“I wouldn’t ask them for anything.”

Before I knew it, the clamor in the hall had subsided. Everyone was listening intently.

“And what would you demand from Bazel?” my dear grandfather pressed.

“Permission to use griffin mail in their principality,” Felicia replied.

“Not ‘*within* their principality’?”

“No, ‘*in*.’ The league doesn’t seem to have any concept of air lanes yet.”

Everyone gasped. Was she planning to use Bazel as a foothold to monopolize every air lane in the league?!

“Is that so?” My dear grandfather smiled. “Thank you. Emma, Sasha and Miss Fosse seem tired. See that they take a rest.”

“What?!” both girls cried in unison.

“At once, venerable master!” Emma responded immediately. Then, she turned to me and winked. These two were long overdue for a break.

Emma and Sally began by capturing the bewildered Felicia. Lily restrained Sasha, although I worried what the maid might be whispering in the noblewoman’s ear—I caught what sounded suspiciously like “Don’t you want to know what Lord Richard *really* fancies?”

“E-Emma?! S-Sally?!” Felicia cried in a panic. “I…I still have work I need to—”

“No, miss, what you *need* first is a bath!” Emma declared.

“And then a nice, long rest until tomorrow,” Sally added.

“I…I’ll take it easy *after* I’m done working!” Felicia wailed.

Emma and Sally sent me another signal.

With affected melancholy, I said the magic words: “How sad my dear brother would be to see you overworking yourself, Felicia.”

“I’m s-sure he wouldn’t mind,” Felicia responded nervously. “But do you, um, really think so?”

“I’m certain of it. But perhaps…you *want* to bother him?”

“N-No! I…I just want to help Allen in my own way, and then give him a piece of my mind once he’s safe and sound. Someone needs to tell him not to overdo it!”

Oh, I knew it. She is *strong—much stronger than Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword.*

Despite the pain in my heart, I smiled at my former upperclassman and said, “In that case, you ought to rest when you need to.”

Felicia’s eyes widened, then she murmured, “A-All right.”

“Then what are we waiting for?!” Emma and Sally cried.

“You too, Lady Sasha,” Cordelia chirped, scooping up the dejected-looking noblewoman.

Sasha was muttering, “What a disgrace. How could I, a daughter of the House of Sykes, let myself be bested in a matter of intelligence?”

Lily, meanwhile, was attempting to whistle, though without success. What on earth had she filled Sasha’s head with?

The girls were still moaning “wooork” and “decryptiooon” as the maids carried them out of the room. Once they were out of sight, my dear grandfather addressed the hall:

“That young lady was Miss Felicia Fosse. The Brain of the Lady of the Sword vouched for her personally. Remember her name—it will be known throughout the continent someday.”

*

With Felicia and Sasha dealt with, we next made for my dear father’s office at the back of the third floor, accompanied by my dear grandfather.

“This is far enough, Sida,” I instructed the maid in training when we reached the door. “Thank you for waiting up for me. You may rest now.”

“No, I’ll wait for you, Lady Lynne!” she insisted. “And then I’ll help you wash those hard-to-reach places in the bath! I promised the Great Moon I would!”

“I’m not going to bathe with you. Now get going.”

“Wh-What?! B-But Lady Lyyynne…” Sida pleaded, her eyes wet with tears.

Oh dear. I’m too soft for my own good.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I said, avoiding eye contact. “A cup of freshly brewed tea after my bath would be lovely.”

“O-Of course, my lady! I u-understand!” The maid in training quivered with excitement and jumped for joy. I also caught her muttering to herself. “Yes! It worked just like Ms. Lily said it would.”

Did she just say “Lily”?

“Is there something on my face?” the older maid asked, responding to my look by making a show of brushing off her cheeks. “I can’t wait to hop in the bath and then drink a nice cup of tea.”

Whatever else happens, I can’t let Sida follow in Lily’s footsteps!

With that resolve firm in my breast, I shot a look at my dear grandfather, who had been waiting patiently. He nodded kindly, so I opened the office door and stepped inside.

I found my parents—Lisa Leinster, the former Lady of the Sword, and Liam Leinster—dressed in their military uniforms and poring over a battlefield map laid out on the desk in the center of the room. They looked up as we entered.

“I’m sorry to call you here now,” my dear mother said. “I know how tired you girls must be.”

“We’re fine!” Lily and I assured her.

“Father-in-law, thank you for overseeing headquarters,” my dear father added. “I truly appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it; all I do is sit in a chair.”

Just as we joined them at the desk, the door flew open and a musical voice announced, “I’m home!” In came my dear grandmother, Lindsey Leinster, fresh from a visit to our enemies’ capital, the city of water. She was all smiles and dressed for travel, with a cloth hat on her head.

Behind her, I spied an imposing, red-haired man in uniform—Under-duke Lucas Leinster. My dear uncle smiled when he saw Lily and me, then followed my dear grandmother into the room.

“Mother-in-law, how did the southern principalities and the city of water respond?” my father asked gravely. “After our great victory at Avasiek, escalating this war benefits them as little as it does us.”

“The city of water was lovely, as always,” my grandmother replied. “Oh, Celebrim is with Maya.” Apparently, the maid corps’s former second-in-command, Celebrim Ceynoth, had accompanied her on her mission.

My grandfather set a chair before the desk, and my grandmother slid into it without the least affectation. She let her legs dangle idly as she reported, “Four of the six southern principalities agreed to wait and see. Only, the state of affairs there is...a bit odd.” Her eyes sparked with profound intellect as she ran her slender finger over the map. “The five northern principalities have historically opposed us, while the southern principalities and the city of water have been averse to war. But as Regina tells it, they’re far from united at the moment.”

I tugged on my older cousin’s right sleeve and whispered, “Lily, who’s Regina?”

“The formidable lady who rules the southern principality of Rondoiro,” the maid whispered back.

Our dear grandmother’s connections never cease to amaze me.

My mother swept back her gorgeous scarlet tresses and addressed my father. “Anko brought us word that the royal family safely escaped to the west. Anna reports that our enemies in the royal capital are plagued by supply issues, yet they’ve withdrawn the Violet Order to the eastern capital. Meaning the Great Tree hasn’t fallen yet. Liam, we know nearly all we could wish to. What is your decision?”

All eyes turned to my father, who stood with his arms folded and his eyes closed. Slowly, he opened them, then boldly declared:

“Needs must. We will divide our armies in two...and send our main force to the royal capital!”

Needless to say, splitting our forces would be a tactical blunder —bringing our full might to bear on our divided foes would be far preferable. But circumstances conspired to deny us the safer course. The enemy in the royal capital seemed to be encountering delays at present, but who could say when they would march south? Our best course was to retake the royal and then the eastern capital and quash the rebellion before they had a chance to act. And naturally, rescuing both my dear brothers must have been on all of our minds.

My grandfather raised his hand. “Lindsey, Lucas, and I will see to the league. We’ll take Felicia, Sasha, and half the forces of the under-duchy. Some hotheads among the southern nobility are clamoring to annex all the northern principalities; we can’t risk leaving them here.”

“I suppose too much victory can be a problem in its own right. I’m deeply in your debt. Yours too, Lucas.” My father bowed deeply

to my grandparents, then gave Uncle Lucas a light thump on the chest.

"I'm your man, Liam!" my uncle responded, with a broad grin. "I wish you and my sister-in-law a bold campaign! May you add to the Leinsters' military glory!"

"We've just received word that the Howards are about to meet the Yustinian Empire on the field," my grandfather added, nodding emphatically. "The time is ripe for our main force to march on the royal capital. Walter won't let the imperials get the better of him, especially not with the professor on his side."

I thought of my friends in the north—Tina Howard and Ellie Walker. I was anxious to talk with them about so many things: my dear brother and sister, the rebellion...

Have I always been this weak?

I could picture Miss First Place planting her hands on her hips and throwing out her nonexistent chest as she said, "Hm... It sounds like you need me more than I thought, Lynne. In that case, I suppose I'll have to hear you out. After all, I *am* the head of our class."

"I h-have lots to tell you too, Lady Lynne. Would you listen?" her maid would add, bashful yet happy, seeming like Tina's older *and* younger sister at the same time.

I take it back—I've nothing to say to Tina! Ellie and I will have a lovely talk on our own! And I'll never, ever back down until Miss First Place apologizes! I'm certain my dear sister will support me in—

I froze, remembering how my dear sister had terrified me on the battlefield. Her furious "Get out of my way!" still rang in my ears.

"Lynne, Lily, you've done well," my father said. "Leave us to work out the details."

I felt a pang in my heart. I was afraid to ask, but...but I needed to know! I screwed up my courage and said, "Dear father and mother...what are your plans for my dear sister?"

Anyone could see that she was dangerously unstable—a berserk swordswoman who merely sliced through anything in her path and incinerated it with those dreadful flames. She might snap and explode at any moment.

"I'd like to keep her in the southern capital," my father said heavily, pressing his hands to his forehead.

"But she'd never agree to that," my mother added. "If we gave

the order..."

My dear sister would discard everything else and run off to join my dear brother—not caring whether she would lose her own life as a result.

"We'll take Lydia with us," my mother concluded. "Lynne, Lily, I want the two of you to be her 'scabbard' while Allen is away."

"Yes, I understand," I responded gloomily.

"I will," Lily echoed, equally disheartened.

Can I do it? Can I, when my dear sister—the Lady of the Sword, with her wings of black and crimson flame—fills me with such terror?

"Lady Lynne." Lily tenderly clasped my hands in hers. How could I rebuff my cousin when she acted like this? It wasn't playing fair.

My father clapped his hands. "Well then, Lynne, Lily, you really must go now. I truly appreciate all you've done."

"Thank you very much," I said. His praise warmed my heart.

"Time for a bath with Lady Lynne!" Lily crowed.

"I...I'm not bathing with you!" I spluttered. "It's out of the question!"

"Awww! Why not? Didn't you see how lonely Sida was just now? She had that 'I wonder if Lady Lynne hates me' look in her eyes."

I grunted as if struck. "Y-You're only saying that to rattle me. Why on earth would I ever hate Sida? She's— Lily, what's that little orb in your hand?"

"Why on earth would I ever hate Sida?" my voice repeated from the recorder.

I screamed and tried to snatch the orb, but Lily had earned her place as the Leinster Maid Corps's number three—she retreated toward the door with such grace that she almost seemed to be dancing. The nerve of her! The sheer, brazen nerve!

Despite my fury, I still bowed to the adults, who were getting on with their discussion, before I followed Lily out of the room. Just as the door closed behind us, I saw my mother turn back to my father, looking more heartbroken than I had ever seen her. She murmured, "If the worst happens—if Lydia..."

What? I stopped walking in spite of myself. *Wh-What...did my dear mother just say?*

"Come on, Lady Lynne!" Lily called, looking over her shoulder as she strode energetically down the corridor.

I nodded stiffly and gave chase, dismissing the thought.

I must have misheard her. Yes, I'm certain of it. I mean, it's…it's simply not possible! My dear mother would never say, "If Lydia falls and becomes a devil, I'll slay her myself."

Chapter 2

"Sounds like the council of chieftains still can't agree, Caren," Dag said heavily. "I don't know the details—they won't even let *us* in these past few days—but as soon as anything changes, I'll let you know."

"Oh, okay" was my listless response.

The former deputy chieftain of the otter clan and I were inside the Great Tree, at ground level. People bustled all around us, carrying and tending to the wounded.

Four days had passed since Mizuho, the fox-clan chieftain's younger sister, had arranged to put a proposal before the council: to invoke the beastfolk's Old Pledge with the Ducal House of Lebufera. Four days of inaction. I thought back to the stories that Allen had read to me when we were kids, of the legendary wolf-clan hero Shooting Star and his companions. Evidently, there were no heroes on the council now.

From a short distance away, two girls in white—my old friends Kaya of the squirrel clan and Koko of the leopard clan—called, "Caren! Come quick!" and "Careeen, someone's hurt bad."

"I'll be right there!" I shouted back and stood up. To Dag I said, "Thank you for keeping me informed."

"Wish I could do more," he grumbled. "You girls are down here treating injuries, and what do those blockheads on the council do?! They hole up in their room on the top level and never so much as show themselves."

Alongside Kaya and Koko, I was currently keeping myself busy treating the casualties brought into the lower levels of the Great Tree. Deep down, I wanted to fight on the front line—to fight so that I could go to Allen's rescue! But His Highness, Lord Richard Leinster, vice commander of the royal guard, and Rolo, Koko's father and captain of the beastfolk militia, wouldn't let me. My parents were against it too. And so, I was stuck waiting for the chieftains to make up their minds.

Our pledge with the Lebuferas entitled the beastfolk to any one

wish within the duke's power to grant. At the moment, asking him to send troops to the eastern capital seemed like our best bet. Yet the council was dragging its feet.

"Felicia would have decided in a heartbeat," I muttered.

"You say something?" Dag asked.

"No, nothing. Goodbye; I should get going."

"Right." As the old otter left, I noticed that his tail was whiter and his back less broad than they had been a few days ago. He was cursing himself for not having dragged my brother aboard his gondola in New Town.

Then, I heard my friends scream.

"Wh-What? N-No way..."

"N-Nooo!"

Returning my attention to them, I saw Kaya ashen-faced, while Koko clung to a litter that had just been carried in. Everyone else around them was agitated too. I pushed through the crowd until I finally got close enough to see the person in the litter...and gasped.

"R-Rolo?!"

The leopard-clan militia leader lay covered in blood. My mom —Ellyn of the wolf clan—was close beside him, dressed in white and checking his wounds. Two young men from the cat and goat clans, who had carried him here, were pleading with her.

"Please! You've got to help the captain!"

"He shielded us."

"He'll be all right," my mom told them. "Caren, give me a hand."

"R-Right!"

She began casting an amplification spell on Rolo, one I'd never seen before. Its beautiful green glow entranced me as I waved my hands over him, casting Divine Light Recovery. The intermediate spell displayed more than its usual potency.

Allen's failure to return had initially reduced our mom to a state of constant tears. But then, four days ago, she had suddenly and very brightly declared, "This is no time for weeping, is it? I've got to pitch in!" and volunteered to help treat the injured. She knew no healing magic herself, but she had done wonders for numerous casualties by amplifying the effects of spells cast by others. It was something that I'd never even known my mom was capable of.

"I learned it from someone back in our roaming days," she explained, frowning as she noticed my gaze on her. "It only works

inside the Great Tree, and Nathan isn't fond of it."

"Teach it to me when this war is over," I said. "And tell Allen and me about how you learned it."

"Of course. You and Allen," she responded haltingly. As soon as my brother's name came up, tears rolled down her cheeks. "Oh, I'm so s-sorry. I need to focus."

Rolo's eyes had been shut tight, but now he quietly opened them and uncurled his clenched fists. One hand held a shattered metal amulet.

"Much appreciated," he mumbled. "Now I can get back to the fighting. Nathan's magic trinket saved my—" His words trailed off in a groan.

"Dad! No!" Koko clung to him tearfully, shaking her head. Even though Rolo's life was out of danger, he was in no condition for battle.

Nevertheless, the captain of the militia pulled himself into a sitting position and shouted, "This scratch is nothing next to what Allen fought with! That young man would have changed the future of the beastfolk, and I let him go off to New Town! Oh, what...what a fool I was. Ellyn, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" Rolo clasped my mom's hand in his bloodstained ones and bowed his head to her again and again.

My mom dried her eyes. "Take some rest now, Rolo," she said, forcing herself to smile. "You don't want Koko to worry, do you?"

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'm so, so sorry."

My healing spell finished its work.

"Carry Rolo out," my mom instructed the militiamen in her usual singsong tone. "And bring the next patient right away."

"W-We're on it!" they responded in unison, marching Rolo's litter off to the library, which had been partially converted into a hospital. Koko went with them.

Kaya looked at me, so I nodded, and my squirrel-clan friend followed the litter as well. The other half of the library housed child refugees, so, knowing Kaya, I guessed she would stop to check in on her new little friends—Lotta, Ine, and Chiho of the New Town fox clan. Lotta was a bright girl, I thought. She'd been looking up beastfolk law.

Shima of the hare clan approached and looked about herself. The militia chapter leader oversaw the healers and had just returned from treating a different patient. "I want at least all of you

to hear this," she said. "We let little Allen go to New Town. Most of the people who were hemmed in there made it safely to the Great Tree...but not him. We're not great sorcerers, but never give up. We're not *allowed* to give up—not after he put his life on the line to save his 'family'!"

Everyone around us nodded and got to work. I saw beastfolk, humans, elves, dwarves... Race was no boundary.

As my mom wiped tears from her eyes, I clasped her free hand. It was cold. "He'll be fine, mom," I said, looking her in the eye. "Allen is alive. He has to be!"

"Caren..."

"He'll be fine. Just fine." I repeated those words over and over as I gazed up into the higher reaches of the Great Tree. The chieftains still showed no sign of coming down.

*

"What did you just say, Konoha?" my lord—His Highness, Lord Gil Algren—asked coldly as he stared out the window. We were in an Algren villa on the outskirts of the eastern capital, where he had once again been confined following his part in the initial hostilities. And though this was our first meeting in thirteen days, his lack of warmth came as no surprise—my egregious failures had forced him to do battle with his idol.

"The Brain of the Lady of the Sword is nowhere to be found in the city," I repeated through clenched teeth. "I suspect he's been abducted."

"Abducted?" my lord repeated, incredulous. "What were Hayden and Zaur doing?!" I had never heard him so genuinely furious.

Earl Haig Hayden was a grand knight and an Algren general, and Earl Zaur Zani, a sorcerer of renown. The two of them had taken the young man prisoner, along with the surviving knights of the royal guard.

Lord Gil approached me. "Konoha."

I gazed up into his cold eyes. The knowledge that I had put this look on his face made my heart ache so fiercely that I thought it would stop beating.

"I can understand why you tried to keep me under house arrest," he continued. "You wanted to keep me away from this

ludicrous rebellion. But you can't do this alone. Speak. Tell me everything you know!"

I fought back tears. Lord Gil had freed me and my sister Momiji from slavery to the Church of the Holy Spirit. How could I subject him to this? To speak would mean my death—Gregory Algren's mark of malediction was branded onto my heart. But what did that matter now?

On the first day of the insurrection, Gregory had shown me Momiji, whom he'd rendered magically unconscious, and said, "I'd like to pit Gil against the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. You're free to refuse, of course. But what will Grant think of him then, with no assurance of where his loyalties lie? One little clash now will reunite you with your long-lost sister and ensure Gil's safety! Why should you hesitate?"

Could I do that to Lord Gil? The indecision had been agony. In the end, I had been unable to make up my mind, and Gregory had captured me. He had displayed Momiji and me to Lord Gil and revealed the truth: "These young women are the sisters you emancipated as a child. Tell me, Gil, will you snuff out the lives you once saved? Or...will you strike down your precious Allen?"

Gregory Algren had proved even viler than I'd imagined.

"What is it?" Lord Gil pressed me. "I can't understand you if you don't speak."

"Lord Gil, I—"

Searing pain shot through my chest. I slumped forward and dropped to my knees, unable even to stand. Cold sweat beaded on my brow.

Not yet. Not until I tell him everything about—

"So, you were bound by magic," Lord Gil said. "Look up."

Though gasping for breath, I still managed to pant, "Yes, my lord" and comply. Then, to my astonishment, Lord Gil pressed his lips to mine. The pain in my heart vanished.

What?

My lord withdrew his lips, leaving me to stare dazedly at him.

"I transplanted the curse to myself," he said. "Now, talk."

"Lord Gil? B-But why? Why?!"

"How should I know?! I just felt like it!" he snapped. "I didn't understand you, and I still don't trust you. How did we end up in this mess?"

Would things have been different if I'd come forward? If I could have brought myself to say, "I'm one of the slave girls you saved from the Church of the Holy Spirit"?

I shook off the fantasy. It was a waste of thought.

"I was originally sent here by Grant Algren," I said. "My orders were to monitor you and to gather intelligence on the Lady of the Sword and the Ducal House of Leinster. That much went according to plan."

Lord Gil's eyes widened. "Then, you joined the secret service because you thought it was your best chance of getting close to me? I'm guessing that Gregory took over the mark on you from Grant at some point."

Grant Algren was a coward with almost no military experience. Any scheme of his had seemed destined to fail. But Gregory Algren was an enigma. Although I knew that he was in league with the fiendish Knights of the Holy Spirit, who had taken my mother's life and reduced my sister and me to slavery, I couldn't fathom his objective. Yet, despite all I'd learned about him, he hadn't seemed intent on dragging Lord Gil into this Great Folly. Thus, I had become Gregory's spy.

"Gregory's orders were almost identical to Grant's," I continued, "although his interest extended to the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. At the moment, I'm what you might call a double agent. I'm so sorry that I wasn't able to warn—"

"If you finish that apology, I'll resent you as long as I live—and for any number of lives to come," my lord interrupted. "And you were right—Gregory isn't trying to hurt me. He apologized to me after my fight with Allen, and he even left me the dagger. And he still lets you have a relatively free hand. Why, I can't say." He paused and then asked, "Do you know where Allen is?"

"I believe a strange group of carriages went northeast," I reported hesitantly.

“Northeast? Where could they be go— The Four Heroes Sea. They must be heading for a ruin from before the War of the Dark Lord.”

Several islands dotted the continent’s largest saline lake, home to ancient structures that the Algrens had long kept hidden. Some, I believed, were still unexplored.

Just then, the detection spells set throughout the villa gave a warning.

“So, the old-timers are here,” Lord Gil spat, scowling. “Fine, I’ll hear them out.” He left the room without a backward glance at me, and the door slammed shut behind him.

My heart ached sharply, though freed of the mark of malediction. My first kiss had been too bitter for words.

*

I chased after Lord Gil. A male knight and a sorceress—guards, I presumed—waited in the corridor outside another room. My lord ignored their salutes and opened the door. Within, two elderly men awaited him—Earls Haig Hayden and Zaur Zani, both seasoned warriors and key leaders of the rebel forces. Their clothes, stained with the grime of battle, suggested that they had snuck away from the front line.

Both remained standing as they fixed piercing stares on me and addressed my lord.

“Lord Gil, kindly send your maid outside.”

“We can’t speak in her presence.”

But Lord Gil responded with alacrity. “Konoha is on my side—even Allen said so. Sit down.”

I pressed a trembling hand to my mouth. *After all I’ve done, he…he’s still willing to call me his ally?*

The old men nodded reluctantly and lowered themselves into chairs.

“We beg your forgiveness for our handling of Mr. Allen,” Earl Hayden began.

“We’re looking into the details, but the identity of his abductor still eludes us,” Earl Zani added. “As does control of the Great Tree.”

“It sounds like they’re making you fight for it,” Lord Gil remarked. “And since the Knights of the Holy Spirit haven’t made a

move, I guess only the eastern houses are paying the price."

The grand knight remained grave. "I believe young Lord Grant plans to recall the Violet Order from the royal capital."

"And I suspect they will be the last troops we can move by rail in that direction," added the old sorcerer. "The mix of military and civilian trains has wrought chaos on the tracks, and the plans drawn up before the war are already in shambles."

"My house are border guards—we've never been ready to go off on campaign," my lord said scathingly. "Our logisticians aren't up to keeping an army supplied by rail. That was always a pipe dream."

Shipping matériel by rail was a marvelous idea...but maintaining steady, well-ordered service without excess or deficiency was a monumental undertaking. A massive support staff was essential to keeping the trains running. Yet that simple fact was lost on Grant and Greck Algren.

The veteran commanders changed the subject.

"One more push, and the Great Tree will be ours. We believe we wounded the captain of the militia a few days ago. The absence of the Brain of the Lady of the Sword is also working in our favor."

"We have you to thank for that, Lord Gil—defeating Mr. Allen was a great achievement."

The old men meant to please my lord, but their flattery touched a nerve. "What was that?" he demanded, abruptly furious. "You think I 'defeated' him?! How stupid can you be?!" In his undisguised rage, he brought his fists down on the table in front of him. The thick wood cracked. "He would never seriously swing a blade at anyone he's decided is one of his own—not even if they begged him to! The whole time we fought...Allen only ever used his sword to block! Even the way he struck with his staff was just like our training bouts at the university! And I was using Radiant Shield!"

Shock was plain on the old earls' faces.

"Impossible."

"He's a sorcerer; I hardly think he could best you at close quarters."

"Are you forgetting he learned swordplay from Lydia Leinster?" Lord Gil responded, his voice trembling. "If he hadn't been hurt, he could've taken my head in the first few swings! And that last advanced lightning spell I cast? Allen invented that for me! You

think he'd let it hit him like that in a fair fight?!"

The Brain of the Lady of the Sword had put up a breathtaking resistance, as had the seasoned knights of the royal guard and the beastfolk veterans. Though vastly outnumbered and battered by waves of onslaught, not one of them had attempted to flee. All their fallen had fallen forward. Some had even attempted suicide attacks. Yet the odds had still been hopelessly against them, so fall they had, one by one. In the end, they had struggled on until flares from the Great Tree signaled that all their companions had reached sanctuary. And the very last one standing had been a dark-haired young man.

"Allen swept the survivors of the royal guard into the canal with a wind spell, then he smiled like he didn't have a care in the world." Lord Gil sobbed. "I begged him to surrender, and what do you think he said?! 'Don't cry, Gil; you made the right choice. Konoha is your ally. Beware of Gregory.' I'm pathetic—a waste of skin—but he was thinking of me to the bitter end. And you think I *beat* him?! You're out of your minds! I lost! He was exhausted from a string of battles and nearly out of mana! I even used this cursed dagger! And he still trounced me! I wanted to be the first to offer Allen my sword when he needed it…but I couldn't believe in him completely. Part of me didn't think he was up to the challenge. And…this is the result."

I bit my lip, struggling to control myself as I listened to my lord's lament.

"But time waits for no man." He gave the old men a fleeting grin. "Let's talk about the future. I shouldn't even have to say this, but the Algrens are finished, and so are all the other eastern houses that took part in this Great Folly. From now on, just focus on damage control."

The earls were shocked.

"Lord Gil?!"

"Our defeat is still far from assured."

My lord scrutinized them. I saw pity in his eyes. "We Algrens have been satisfied with defending the border for the past two hundred years, while the Leinsters, Howards, and Lebuferas have been spoiling for another war with the Dark Lord. If you seriously think we're their equals"—he looked away and sighed—"then we've been drowsing in the east for far too long."

Lord Gil's assessment stung the old men into silence.

“They call Leinster the ‘god of blades,’ Howard the ‘god of war,’ and Lebufera the ‘god of battle.’ That’s who we and all our vassals picked a fight with. And to top it all off, we hurt Allen. The Lady of the Sword won’t let that slide—not in a million years. You know what she told us back at the university, when Allen wasn’t around?” My lord raised his hands and smiled through his tears. “She said, ‘I don’t care much about any of you, although I don’t mind lending you a hand when I have the time. But if you ever hurt him or betray his trust, expect no mercy.’”

I had gone over the records of every battle that the Lady of the Sword and her Brain had fought in with a fine-tooth comb, and I’d studied their characters as well. That search had led me to a realization—Lydia Leinster was the world’s finest blade, and that young man was her scabbard.

“All the stories you’ve heard about the Lady of the Sword’s exploits are true. She drove off the black dragon, killed a four-winged devil and a pure-blooded vampire, and even slew the Stinging Sea—that millennium-old writhing monstrosity.” With heartfelt awe, my lord concluded, “We’re going to have to fight a genuine living legend on the warpath.”

“But we’re no weaklings ourselves,” Earl Hayden ventured hesitantly.

“Surely not even the Lady of the Sword could stand against all of us,” added Earl Zani.

Lord Gil dismissed their objections with a wave of his left hand. I fought the urge to rush forward with a healing spell when I saw that it was bleeding. “The boss is only the Lady of the Sword when she’s got Allen at her side. Without him, she’s the Lady of Fire—out to incinerate everything in her path. Ever been hit by a Firebird? It’s not fun. At this point, you’d best be ready for her to reduce the better part of the royal and eastern capitals to ash.”

Cold sweat beaded on the old men’s foreheads. They had gravely miscalculated.

“As bad as that?”

“Is she truly human?”

I suspected old Duke Guido Algren and his trusted followers had different goals than Grant or Gregory…but I never imagined they were this out of touch.

“Launching your war while Allen was in town was the worst mistake you could have made,” Lord Gil said heavily. “Of course,

attacking the subjects you're sworn to protect was already a blunder. How do you expect to reconcile with the beastfolk after this?"

The old earls bowed their heads deeply.

"Our treatment of the beastfolk has been inexcusable."

"When the time comes, we shall accept full responsibility."

I supposed that the Knights of the Holy Spirit—those devils in human skin—and the troops they had incited were behind the fervor to attack the beastfolk. These old men had done their best to shelter beastfolk following the Battle of New Town...but explaining that wouldn't restore the trust we'd lost.

"When Haag gave me this dagger, he told me to 'preserve the honor of the Algren name,'" Lord Gil said derisively. "He overestimated me. I'm a dolt who turned his sword on the person he should have offered it to. I have no honor."

His words pierced my heart. I would never be able to atone for underestimating Gregory Algren's wickedness.

"Why didn't my dad—Guido Algren—stop this farce?" Lord Gil demanded, shocking me with his glacial tone. "He learned what it means to be a knight from the Emerald Gale, Former Duchess Leticia Lebufera herself, and so did you. I know you wouldn't just go along with this, so tell me: What is the old man planning? If it turns out to be nonsense..."

Oh, it...it wasn't supposed to be like this, I thought as the man I'd sworn to protect, even at the cost of my own life, spoke the fateful words:

"I'll finish him off myself."

A mournful silence fell over the grand knight and the veteran sorcerer. This whole catastrophe must have been as much a string of miscalculations for them as it had been for me. At last, reluctantly, they began to speak.

When Lord Gil had heard the whole of his house's "duty," he clutched his head in his hands. "It's ridiculous," he murmured. "Idiotic. Is that why Haag saddled me with this dagger? So that I could 'mop up' when it was all over? How selfish can you be?!"

The old men merely lowered their heads.

I recalled old Duke Algren as I had seen him that day, when he had berated a young Lord Gil for freeing my sister and me. The man's harshness astounded me. To defend his country, he would

even do this to his own son.

A soft knock broke the silence.

"Lord Hayden, we have orders to assault the Great Tree," a man —presumably one of the guards I had seen on my way in— announced from outside.

"Us as well, master," the woman added.

"I'm coming, Huguemont," the grand knight responded heavily.

"I understand, Sandra," the great sorcerer echoed.

Both old men made grimly for the door.

Lord Gil muttered, "I won't wish you luck, but...don't die yet."

After a long pause, both earls responded, "Yes, my lord."

Once the pair had gone, Lord Gil and I returned to his chamber. He pulled open a drawer of his desk, without even bothering to sit down, and tossed a small cloth purse to me. I scrambled to catch it and found it surprisingly heavy. It was full of gold coins.

"That should buy you passage for the time being," my lord said. "Rescue your sister and run. We...don't have much time left. When the other ducal houses strike back, they won't pull their punches." After a pause, he added, "Thanks for trying to protect me."

Those last, gentle words pierced my heart. "Lord Gil!" I pleaded, coins spilling from the purse as I pressed my hands to my chest and fell to my knees on the floor. "I know I've no right to ask this of you, but please, please, *please* keep me with you till the end!"

"I saved you and your sister on a whim. And I landed in this mess because of my own stupidity. What the hell did I study with him at university for?"

I softly clasped Lord Gil's still-bleeding hand and cast a healing spell, maintaining the magic as I shook my head over and over. "No! No! *No*! That day, at the underground slave market in the pontiff's domain, I—we—were in the depths of despair. And you saved us! Only you! Knowing that someone reached out to me, a friendless girl from the southern isles, was...was what kept me alive until today. So...So please, I beg of you, keep me at your side!"

Tears blurred my vision.

I've failed—failed miserably. But...I'm still alive. So, this time, I'll at least keep Lord Gil safe and whole!

After what seemed like the longest silence of my life, my lord quietly responded, "First, find your sister and get her to safety. Then, if you still want to...come back to me. I'm still an Algren, and

I have a duty to do."

*

The bridge before the Great Tree was nothing short of a war zone.

"Vice Commander Richard Leinster! Have at you!" a young enemy knight bellowed, lunging at me with his spear. Behind him, a line of his comrades readied arrows of lightning and fired them in unison. After days of constant fighting, the rebels knew me by sight.

A diminutive figure darted in front of me, and the spear the knight thrust bounced off a bearlet-clan man's massive shield.

"Not on my watch!" shouted Toma, a chapter leader of the beastfolk militia. "Sui!"

"On it!" responded a young fox-clan man in a tattered blue martial arts uniform. Sui, a survivor of the Battle of New Town, hurled a tiny metal plate made in the Great Tree. The jury-rigged amulet unleashed a simple lightning-resistant barrier, intercepting the magical projectiles.

The enemy knight grunted as a jumping kick from Sui sent him flying into his comrades. The fox-clan fighter landed with a grin on his face.

"You're slowing down, Toma," he quipped. "Old age must be catching—"

"Die, damn you!" A group of heavy infantry charged, bringing their battle-axes down on Sui.

Toma reacted instantly. He used his shield to stop the blows and, with a whoop of exertion, swung his war hammer one-handed at the astonished rebels. The armored knights fell back.

Talk about brawn!

"What about age, Sui?" he retorted. "Is that why your fiancée ran out on you?"

"Muscle-head!" Sui snapped.

Ah, friendship.

I raised my sword high and fired a Scorching Sphere into the enemy line. The advanced spell chewed through their fire-resistant barriers and punched a hole in their ranks.

"Fire! Follow the vice commander's lead!" a young lady knight —Valery Lockheart—barked from behind me. Offensive spells of all elements poured into the breach I'd created, magnifying the

confusion and forcing the rebels to retreat. Their standards proclaimed them a collection of second-string units led by barons and baronets, and their morale was low.

"I'd call that victory," I murmured, then let out my breath and sheathed my sword. It didn't feel quite right, since it wasn't my own trusty blade—Allen had swiped that—but I was finally getting used to it.

"Get the wounded inside the Great Tree!" Toma commanded.

"Rest in shifts!" Sui added. "Shizuku, sort out who's hurt!"

Their subordinates acknowledged the orders and got to work. I'd worried when the rebels had put Rolo out of action, but the militia's performance had proved my fears unfounded.

"Bertrand, we should— Oh, I almost forgot." I cut myself short and scratched my head. My second-in-command had stayed behind in New Town with Allen. These days of constant battle were wearing me out.

"Please rest as well, Vice Commander. We'll build new fortifications while you're gone!" Valery urged me with enthusiasm. We were so hard-pressed that I could no longer afford to keep my youngest knight, who wore her long pale-green hair in a rough bun, away from the battlefield. The militia was in the same predicament with their youngest member, Shizuku.

The other knights behind her looked at me, as did Toma and Sui. Their eyes all conveyed the same message: "Rest."

"It's in your hands," I responded at last. "Let me know immediately if you spot movement in the enemy camp."

I withdrew from the bridge back to the Great Tree. Around me, a constant stream of people came and went. But despite their activity, everyone was on their last legs.

At the outbreak of the insurrection, we had pitched our barricades in the vast plaza across the bridge from the Great Tree. Since then, however, the rebels had forced us back halfway across the Great Bridge. Our front line currently stood within hailing distance of the Great Tree. A steady stream of casualties had halved our fighting power and deprived both my knights and the militia of most of our officers. Even so, we couldn't afford to recall Shima of the hare clan to active combat except as a last resort—we could never have held the line this long if she hadn't been inside the Great Tree, organizing medical efforts. Yet I could hardly send Caren into

battle either. She was even younger than Valery.

And even in these desperate straits, the council of chieftains remained silent.

No news arrived from elsewhere. We didn't even know what had happened to Allen or those who'd stayed with him. To make matters worse, our enemies were withholding the core of their army, forcing us to wear ourselves down fighting lesser troops day in and day out. We had stores of water and provisions, but we were losing our grip on the waterways.

I left the road. Surveying the wreckage of gondolas floating in the vast canal, I pulled out my cigarette case…then put it away again. I only had one left.

A raucous laugh cut in on my brooding. "You're looking glum, Lord Red. I heard I'd probably find you here."

"Dag," I responded listlessly as the former deputy chieftain of the otter clan approached.

He gestured to me, so I followed him. We secured a table and chairs to sit facing each other amid the hustle and bustle.

"This might be it for us," the old otter said dejectedly, his pipe between his teeth. "The ape-clan chieftain is the only sitting council member who's so much as poked his head into the lower levels, and he looked shifty. I need a favor from you."

"What a coincidence: I was about to ask the same of you. But first…" I cast a sound-dampening spell, albeit not a very good one. Once our voices were no longer audible, I looked at Dag. "I can't keep secrets from you. Our military situation is desperate. We need to get at least the women, children, elderly, and injured out before the Great Tree falls. We'll be your rear guard."

The old otter mulled that over for a moment. "I'll rustle up some boats. But on one condition—the favor I mentioned." He slammed his pipe down on the table. I saw deep sorrow in his eyes. "We'll smuggle out the wounded, women, children…and all the members of other races who've taken sanctuary in the Great Tree. All the former chieftains, deputies, and most people of influence have already agreed. We want you to go with them for protection."

"B-But…" I fumbled for a response.

"You know, Allen was only yea high back when I first met him." Dag laughed, illustrating with his fingers. The hand holding his pipe was trembling. "He wasn't much taller than Caren, he didn't have much mana to speak of, and he was no athlete either.

And on account of his looks, he stood out like a sore thumb in the beastfolk districts. He used to cry on my lap a lot when he rode my gondola, sobbing about how much better life would be if he had beast ears and a tail." He paused, then added, "That stays between us. I haven't even told Nathan, Ellyn, or Caren."

I gave a slight nod. I'd looked into Allen's past after that business with Gerard, and I'd read that the beastfolk had been less than welcoming to him for a time.

Dag turned to stare off into the distance—toward New Town. "But he never gave up. He worked, and worked, and kept working! And he got himself into the Royal Academy without any backing. He wrote me a letter after he passed the exam. What do you think it said?"

I held my peace, inviting Dag to continue.

"'I'm truly grateful for all the priceless lessons I've learned from you. I hope you'll give me another ride on your gondola someday. Till we meet again, Grandpa Dag!'" the old otter recited. "I didn't do anything for him—just gave him a few boat rides. I...I've *never* been able to do anything for him, but...but he..." Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I cried that night. The shrimp pulled it off! Little Allen, who used to sit on my lap and listen to me drone on about the old days, made good!" Dag covered his face with a trembling hand. "I never said it, but he...he was like a grandson to me. And...I didn't lift a finger to save him. Listen, Lord Red." The old otter lowered his hand, revealing a look of resolve in his reddened eyes. I could tell that he loved Allen deeply. And of course, Allen loved him back. "We've had our fill of hiding behind our kids and grandkids to buy our old bones a little extra time. We've had more of that than we can stomach! It stands to reason that it's our turn next. So, Your Highness, Lord Richard Leinster, when the time comes, take good care of our wives, sons, daughters, grandkids, and all the folk of other races stranded here."

*

After parting ways with Dag, I walked back to the foot of the Great Bridge. I was just thinking that it was about time I returned to the front when someone called, "Lord Richard."

I turned to see a wolf-clan man in timeworn spectacles with

metallic soot stains on his cheeks—Allen's adoptive father, Nathan. Fatigue and grief hung heavy on him.

I bowed deeply. It was the only thing I could do.

"Please, stop. Don't forget you're the son of a duke," he protested. Then I heard him sigh, and he handed me a small metal plate engraved with an intricate design. "I wanted you to have this."

"Me?" I asked, raising my head and accepting the amulet. "Isn't this one of the enchanted artifacts that so narrowly saved Rolo's life?"

Nathan nodded slightly. "It's an experimental talisman to guard against magic. It can avert a fatal blow, but only once." He fell silent for a moment. "That's the last one I can make with the materials I brought here."

"I can't accept this," I protested, startled. "I have no right."

"You and your knights have defended the Great Tree all this time. If you fall...we'll be doomed. I've given the others to my wife and daughter."

Meaning he didn't keep one for himself.

I bowed again.

"If you still have misgivings," he continued, "would you listen to a little of my grumbling?"

"Of course," I replied slowly.

Nathan removed his spectacles and gazed at the Great Tree. For some reason, there seemed to be more sea-green griffins flying about its branches since the outbreak of the rebellion. At last, he murmured, "Allen was...too good a son for us."

"How so?" I asked, confused.

"You must have looked into his background. The Ducal House of Leinster couldn't fail to investigate a wolf-clan boy so close to Lady Lydia." Nathan spoke matter-of-factly, and the gleam of wisdom in his eyes reminded me that he was among the city's finest magical artificers. "Ellyn and I aren't related to Allen by blood. We found him and took him in. At the time, we had left our homeland to wander the continent, and we were just looking for a place to settle down."

According to the report I'd read, Allen's lineage was "wholly unknown."

"Life in the eastern capital brought us peace and tranquility. We even had our daughter, Caren. But because our lives were so

blissful, we were slow to notice the isolation Allen faced."

Quoth the report: "Allen suffered a period of ostracization following the death of a fox-clan girl in New Town." But my house's investigation had been incomplete. What could have made the death a *state secret*?

"Ellyn and I didn't know what to do. Leaving the eastern capital would have been the best thing for Allen. On the other hand, Caren was still so young. In the end, we decided to stay." Nathan closed his eyes, and his shoulders trembled. "But if I'd known it would come to this...I would rather have tried my luck in any other city in the kingdom! I made the wrong choice."

Nathan's voice, soft but carrying, stopped passersby in their tracks.

"It was the same with the Royal Academy. He could have advanced to the next stage of his education earlier—he had the grades for it, and schools in the western capital admit younger students. But we wanted to hang on to his smile as long as we could. So we kept him in the nest, even after he had the wings to fly away."

Meaning he might not have met Lydia. I guess everything hung on the slimmest of chances. Or was it fate?

"I don't have the strength of my ancestors. Ellyn and I could never have found it in ourselves to come this far if not for that boy. I could never repay him, except by making myself his shield. And yet, I—"

"Allen wouldn't want that. And a lot of soldiers owe you their lives," I said, staring straight at Nathan. He seemed about to collapse under the weight of his shame. Yet those portable lightning-resistant barriers had been his idea and his handiwork.

Suddenly, he smiled. It made him look a lot like Allen. "No parent's survival is worth the life of his child. I'm sure the world is full of people who think differently...but I won't budge. Parents live to love and protect their children! At least, that's how I believe it should be."

Nathan's audience nodded silently.

"This is only a guess," I said, "but I think he simply wanted to repay you for all you've done for him."

A long silence ensued. Then, Nathan repeated, "He wanted to...repay us?"

"Yes. He loves his parents, his sister, and his whole beastfolk

family with all his heart, and he wanted to do anything he could to repay you for all you've given him. I'm sure he feels the same way toward my sister. Prejudice against beastfolk is still strong in the royal capital, but she's stood by him since their Royal Academy entrance exam. He grew up following your example. Of that, I have no doubt."

But that doesn't mean I'm letting you off the hook when this war is over, Allen. You've got a bright future ahead of you, whether you like it or not. I refuse *to let you die.*

"Stand proud," I continued, placing a hand on Nathan's shoulder. "You haven't done anything wrong! I'm certain that without you, he wouldn't have been able to keep forging ahead as far as he has. Richard Leinster will always be proud to have fought here alongside Allen of the wolf clan."

Nathan wept as, haltingly, he responded, "Thank you."

"Vice Commander!" Valery screamed from the Great Bridge. The urgency in her voice was unmistakable. "Activity in the enemy camp! They're flying the standards of the Algren guards and the House of Zani! Even Grant Algren may have joined their ranks!"

"I understand!" I called back, feigning composure. "Valery, alert Shima too!"

"Yes, sir!"

This was probably their main assault. Our battered forces couldn't weather it without Shima and her healers—if we could fend it off at all.

No, we're beyond worrying about what's possible. It's do or die now. Allen didn't give up, and I'm his friend. I can't let myself lose heart either.

"When this battle is over, tell me more about Allen," I said to Nathan in parting. "Ideally over some nice, stiff drinks with Dag."

*

The surges of mana from outside were fiercer than they'd been in days. I couldn't help muttering about it as I worked, eliciting uneasy looks from Kaya and Koko, who nervously called my name.

We were sitting in the library on the second level of the Great Tree, slicing unneeded clothes into makeshift bandages. Nearby, Ine and Chiho of the fox clan cowered, their ears and tails trembling as they clung to Lotta—an older girl from one of the city's orphanages

who admired my brother. Mere moments ago, they had been reading a picture book called *Griffins Pay Their Debts*. The two younger girls' mother, Mizuho, was nowhere in sight. She and my mom were attending a healers' council.

I ventured out of the library and found the massive front doors of the Great Tree standing open. A steady stream of severe casualties carried on litters passed through them. Was the battle going against us?

"Kaya, Koko, I'm going! Watch the girls for me!" I shouted, throwing off my white coat before I knew what I was doing.

A few days earlier, my friends had stopped me. This time, however, they hung their heads in silence.

I tugged my Royal Academy beret low over my eyes and made for the exit. Other armed people were also flocking to the doors—I must not have been the only one ready to join the fight. Shima of the hare clan stood in the doorway, spell-lance in hand, and she had a band of militia with her.

"The enemy's launched a general offensive," she said grimly. "We're going out to fight! I'd like you to stand guard inside the Great Tree while we're gone. If the worst happens, please flee with the children." She bowed deeply and set off for the battlefield. I'd never seen her look like this before.

I was just thinking that I needed to join her when someone threw their arms around me from behind.

"Mom," I began.

"No, Caren!" she cried, squeezing me tight. "No! Please...Please don't go." She was teary-eyed, and I felt a pang at this fresh reminder of how thin she'd become.

"Mom, I got stronger in the royal capital. I need to protect everyone!"

"Caren, if I lose you too, I...I don't know what I'll do."

A shiver of fear ran through me. I could understand just a little of how Allen felt. Even so, I squeezed our mom's hands and said, "I promise I'll come back. After all, I still need to go save Allen!"

My mom looked at me in silent sorrow. I slowly stepped away from her and spotted my dad in the crowd. He grimaced but gave me a slight nod. I straightened up and made for the doorway.

"Caren!" my mom shouted. But I didn't look back—I wouldn't have been able to hold in my tears.

After leaving the Great Tree, I took my first breath of outside air in ages. It stank of blood and burning.

"Is the front line that close?" I muttered.

When Allen had set out to rescue the people of New Town, the royal guard and the militia had controlled the plaza across the Great Bridge. But no longer—our lines had been driven back almost to the Great Tree.

Numerous sea-green griffins wheeled through the sky above.

"If Allen were here, the one we met before might have helped us," I murmured, suddenly reminded of the picture book that the girls had been reading. It was a fleeting hope.

I made slow progress through the press of people carrying the wounded into the Great Tree and others leaving it to join the battle. As I neared the front, however, I began to get a clearer picture of the situation. Both vanguards were locked in an intense magical firefight. One enemy unit in particular was firing elementary lightning spells at a rapid clip. Its members held what looked like oddly shaped sticks. Were those Lalannoyan spell-guns?

I spotted Dame Valery Lockheart and Shizuku of the goat clan—the pair who had stopped me from leaving the Great Tree a few days earlier—casting healing spells for all they were worth.

On the very front line, champions were locked in combat. Two commanders stood on the enemy side: the elderly grand knight Haig Hayden, wielding a single-edged spear, and a grizzled sorcerer with a hat and spell-lance. I also spied the rebels' supreme commander, Grant Algren, sitting astride his horse at the rear of the enemy line. On our side were Lord Richard; Toma of the bearlet clan, who had taken command of the militia following Rolo's injury; Sui of the fox clan, leader of the New Town militia; and Shima, who had just joined the fray.

I hurried to the royal guard's formation, which was beginning to buckle. Valery was shouting something about "Earls Haig Hayden and Zaur Zani." I recognized the latter name too—a powerful enemy!

Hayden swept his spear to one side, unleashing five rapid casts of the advanced spell Imperial Storm Tornado. Then old Zani raised his spell-lance high, triple-casting the advanced spell Imperial Thunder Lance. His blasts struck the tornadoes...and merged into five raging thunderstorms.

Eight advanced spells in one attack?!

The old soldiers bellowed, “See what you make of this!” and “Block it if you can!” as they launched their spells. If Lord Richard and the militia leaders dodged, the earls’ magic would demolish our lines!

“I’ll start!” Toma shouted, moving ahead of the group and raising his greatshield to block the first storm.

“Don’t fight alone, Toma!” Shima called from behind him. “Remember: I’m with you!”

Her powerful magical defenses dampened the force of the spells, allowing Toma’s shield to weather one blast and then another. But that was his limit. Before the third storm struck, Toma collapsed, groaning, with his shield in splinters.

Sui darted forward to cover him. Focusing all his mana into one hand, the fox-clan man roared and drove a straight punch into the third storm...and then through it!

But Sui fell forward as well. Shima cast healing spells on him and Toma, maintaining her barrier all the while, but her mana was rapidly dwindling. And there were still two thunderstorms left.

“Thank you all!” Lord Richard shouted. “I’ll take it from here!” He charged forward, both hands holding his sword aloft. With two casts of the advanced spell Scorching Sphere, he intercepted the fourth and fifth storms. At last, the path to the old earls was clear for a—

“Perish!” Grant Algren screeched from the rear of the rebel line. A downward sweep of his enchanted halberd launched two casts of the advanced spell Imperial Lightning Dance at the fallen Toma and Sui.

Of all the times to butt in!

The royal guard and militia were too busy grappling with enemy troops to respond. Even I was too far away! I wouldn’t make it in time!

Shima screamed. Then, I saw Lord Richard wrest his charge onto another course. With a ferocious roar, he came to Toma and Sui’s defense, meeting the enemy lightning magic with two swift strokes of his sword.

Yes! He blocked them perf—

The knight at the head of the Algren guards and the sorceress leading Earl Zani’s troops both wrenched their units around to take aim at Lord Richard.

“All together now!”

“Fire!”

Countless spears and bolts of lightning rained down on Lord Richard. He doggedly swung his sword, shielding the fallen militia leaders. Behind him, Shima, his knights, the militia, and the volunteer fighters threw up the strongest magical defenses they could muster. Yet the overwhelming number of enemy attacks wore away their barriers until, at last, a spell found its mark.

I immediately raised my hands against the blinding flash and the shock wave that followed. My ears caught the sound of metal cracking. Then the light subsided, and I opened my eyes, dreading what I would see.

Our lines had suffered no direct damage. However...

“Now you’ve done it,” Lord Richard grumbled. “I’m even deeper in Nathan’s debt than before.” Though his skin and armor were stained all over with his blood, he glared at the grand knight and his sorcerer companion.

What does he mean, he owes my dad? I wondered. Then, I remembered the amulet that I carried.

The red-haired knight swept his sword to the side, heedless of his injuries. His fiery spears kept the old earls at bay while he shouted, “Get Toma and Sui out of here! On the double!”

“Yes, sir!”

Knights and militia quickly pulled the battered pair behind our lines. The fallen leaders left thick crimson trails behind them. Shima, Valery, and Shizuku rushed to heal them, but they’d lost too much blood to continue this fight.

Both allied and enemy forces broke off their clash and fell back to regroup.

“Huguemont, why did you interfere?!” the grizzled grand knight bellowed. “And you, Duke Grant! We can handle ourselves!”

“Sandra, do not sully this honorable contest!” echoed the old sorcerer. “Duke Grant, I expect an explanation of your conduct later.”

“F-Forgive me,” responded the shaken knight. The sorceress, meanwhile, protested, “B-But master...”

“F-Forget such trifles! Resume the assault!” Grant snapped, rattled but still giving orders. His troops, however, hesitated to obey.

All the while, healing light flickered over Lord Richard. Yet it wasn’t enough. Our forces’ mana was nearly exhausted.

“Pardon us,” Hayden said. “Still, you cannot defeat the two of us, wounded and fatigued as you are.”

“You fought well,” Zani added. “Surrender. We shall take you as prisoners of war, as we took those who fought in New Town.”

Lord Richard made no response to the proposal.

Prisoners? Does that include Allen?

The red-haired knight deliberately wiped the blood from his cheeks. Then he pulled out his case of cigarettes, lit one, and placed it in his mouth with practiced elegance. After blowing a puff of smoke…he tossed his cigarette into the air and incinerated it with a fire spell.

“That’s all you have to say?” he demanded, thrusting his sword into the Great Bridge. “The answer is no. Absolutely, positively no!” Fiery plumes filled the air, resonating with his roar. Then, quietly, Lord Richard Leinster addressed the earls. “Haig Hayden. Zaur Zani. That foolish question wasn’t worthy of a grand knight and a sorcerer of your renown. Have you forgotten our kingdom’s oldest traditions?”

I could feel his knights’ morale rising as the vice commander shouted, “No matter how fierce the battle, no matter how desperate our plight…the royal guard never surrenders!”

The clang of metal on metal filled the air. As one, the nearby knights beat their breastplates in agreement.

“Especially not after Allen left me to finish this fight! He entrusted it to me!” Flames of wrath flared in Lord Richard’s eyes. “How could I call myself a knight, much less a future duke, if I abandoned a promise to my brother-in-arms?!” He paused, then concluded in a calmer tone, “Do you have any other questions?”

“I see we’ve wasted your time,” the grand knight replied.

“We must be showing our age,” said the sorcerer.

Both old earls then raised their weapons. Once again, advanced spells began to take shape on the tips of their blades.

I touched my sheath. I was finally close enough! But just as I made up my mind to act, I was interrupted by the sound of flapping wings and a cry of praise from above.

“What splendid resolve, Young Master Richard! That was true Leinster spirit!”

I…I know this voice! B-But she’s in the southern capital.

I hurriedly looked up to see four griffins circling. On their backs were…Leinster maids!

Lord Richard pulled his sword out of the ground and rested it on his shoulder. “I’m still no match for my mother, though,” he said. “Did I earn a passing grade, Anna?”

Softly and without a sound, the petite, chestnut-haired head maid alighted before Lord Richard. She was unarmed and empty-handed, although she wore a breastplate over her familiar uniform.

“Yes, of course!” she crowed, with a cheery wink. “Now please, allow us to take it from here.”

*

Three more maids joined Anna on the ground, and their griffins ascended to higher altitudes. One wore her extremely pale scarlet hair in a loose bun behind her head. Her ears were rather long, and her skin was on the dark side. She was tall, slender, and carried a massive jet-black scythe in her left hand. Also, she had a very full chest.

To the right of the scythe-wielder, a small woman with her light-blue hair in pigtails unshouldered her staff and started constructing spell formulae. Probably advanced water spells, I thought.

The last maid had magnificent silver hair. Her teeth were bared to reveal her canines, and she looked eager for a fight. She drew the pair of curved swords at her hips and began casting potent strengthening magic on herself.

“I never expected to see maids on the battlefield,” Earl Zani barked, “but we’ll show them no mercy! Prepare a full magical barrage!”

“Yes, sir!” The old sorcerer’s troops readied their spells and spell-guns.

“Young Master Richard, allow me,” Anna instructed. “I’m simply dying to introduce myself.”

“All right, but don’t go *too* hard on them,” Lord Richard responded, then retreated behind our lines. Knights and militia rushed to begin treating him.

“Goodness!” Anna exclaimed, sounding just a little put out. “You show concern for the rebels, but none for me? Whenever did you grow into such a coldhearted gentleman? Oh, woe is me.”

“Fire!” Earl Zani roared, bringing down his spell-lance with great force.

His troops activated their lightning magic...and, one after another, their spell-guns misfired, sending armored rebels sailing through the air. The enemy ranks collapsed into a disordered cacophony of shouts and screams.

Wh-What in the world just happened?

"I am Anna, head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster," Anna announced, bobbing an elegant curtsy. "But you needn't remember my name—I would simply *hate* to gain a reputation among degenerate knights."

Her sudden taunt provoked a burst of anger from the enemy forces.

"You claim that we have fallen from knighthood?" old Earl Zani demanded sternly.

"Hm?" Anna tilted her head in mock confusion, unfazed by the rebels' ire. Then she clapped her hands, beamed, and exclaimed, "Oh! I beg your pardon. I was forgetting: you've essentially been beaten curs since Blood River. And now here you are, striving to sink even lower! I can't help but admire your wasted effort."

"Silence!" Sandra the sorceress screamed, poised to cast the advanced lightning spell that she held ready on her staff. "We aren't beaten, and we haven't forgotten Blood River! Our ancestors fought valiantly, but fortune went against them, and victory narrowly slipped through their grasp!"

This woman has no idea what happened at Blood River.

"I cannot let that go unanswered!" added the old sorcerer.

"Zaur, wait!" Hayden cried, but his comrade ignored him. Zani deployed another three Imperial Thunder Lances on the tip of his spell-lance.

Anna looked back and met my gaze. "Have no fear, Miss Caren. Though I may not look it..."

The old sorcerer and his apprentice fired their advanced spells! In response, Anna lightly waved her left hand. In that instant, I glimpsed lines racing through the air.

"What?! I-Impossible!" the sorcerer cried as, to everyone's surprise, his spells disintegrated, torn apart moments short of activation.

"I am fairly strong," Anna concluded, with a wink.

"She *cut* an advanced spell?!" old Earl Zani wailed, matched by Sandra's disbelieving "I-It can't be!"

The blood drained from Grant's face.

“Child’s play, if I may say so,” the head maid crowed. “Young Master Richard could have done ten times better with ease!”

“Not on your life,” Lord Richard cut in wryly. He must have lost too much blood, because he was pale-faced and sitting down.

“You *are* heartless, my lord. Oh, the humanity!” Anna burst into crocodile tears. At the same time, she twitched her right hand.

The old sorcerer let out a stunned cry as his spell-lance and magical defenses were swiftly sliced into dozens of pieces. His hat flew off his head.

“Master!” Sandra shrieked.

The earl himself stood wide-eyed in astonishment. But just when the countless lines were about to cut him to ribbons, the old grand knight shouted, “Zaur!” and grabbed his comrade by the collar, yanking him backward. The sorcerer was bleeding, but his troops caught him.

The lines wreaked their havoc on the enemy front as well, slicing through spell-guns, halberds, staves, shields, and armor with ease. Rebel soldiers screamed and groaned as terror spread through their ranks. Only one of them managed to fend off the attack. Though bleeding freely and casting healing magic on himself, Hayden glared at Anna and said, “That was an imperial technique.”

“I formerly served as a Yustinian assassin,” Anna cheerfully admitted. “The empire accorded me their highest rank—Angel of Death.”

The rebels froze in shock. Was a Yustinian Angel of Death really *that* frightening?

“All forces, fall back to the middle of the bridge,” the grand knight ordered, raising his left hand. “Huguemont, take command. Duke Grant, withdraw!”

After a brief pause, the knight responded, “Yes, sir!” and Grant, “V-Very well.” The enemy troops got over some of their fear and started retreating across the Great Bridge.

Anna and Hayden faced off, their expressions a study in contrast. She was all smiles, while he wore an emotionless scowl. Then, with a sharp grunt, the old grand knight struck the butt of his spear on the ground and cast a water spell. A fine mist rose to cover the bridge.

“Your tricks are difficult to see through,” he said. “But not impossible.”

“Yes, I see,” Anna responded. “You’re certainly quick to adapt.

But would you permit me to make just one observation?" She lightly waved her hands.

"Useless!" the grand knight roared, charging forward. "If I can see it, I can—"

The screams came from the retreating enemy lines. Spraying blood and chunks of flesh filled the air as arms and armor fell in pieces. Even Grant fell off his horse, his cry for help cut short as the press of soldiers swallowed him.

"You're still. In. Range," the head maid chortled mockingly.

The rebel soldiers continued to scream.

"What's going on?! Wh-What the hell is hitting us?!"

"Strings! She's attacking with invisible strings!"

"Deploy your strongest magical defenses! Conjure stone walls and dig in! Keep the healing spells coming!"

"Celenissa, Nico, Jean," Anna called to the other three maids. "Disperse the riffraff as you see fit. This bridge is built from old boughs of the Great Tree—it won't break easily. You may be as rough as you like."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"You got it!"

"All right!"

The maids raised their weapons and sprinted past Hayden. The old grand knight remained motionless, his spear at the ready—he couldn't afford to take his eyes off Anna.

The lead maid, Celenissa, tore into a group of heavily armored knights. Her two-handed ebony scythe cleaved through a row of sturdy tower shields and dropped even the rear line of sorcerers to the ground in a bloody heap.

"She's firing blades of wind from her scythe? I can't even count them all," I murmured, trembling. Her magical finesse seemed impossible.

Nico, the maid with the light-blue hair, stopped before she reached the enemy and held her staff high. A massive spell formula I'd never seen before loomed over the bridge. A moment later, towering funnels of water surged up from the canal below.

"Are those lions of water?" Shizuku asked in astonishment. "And so many of them."

Nico had conjured an army of magical creatures—several hundred of them at the least! She struck the ground with the butt of her staff, and her lions charged into the rebel forces.

No sooner had the silver-haired maid, Jean, reached the enemy lines than she leapt high into the air. Naturally, that made her an easy target. Yet she plowed through the magical barrage aimed her way, relying on tough barriers and countless healing spells. With an earsplitting roar, she swung her curved swords down from above her head. Even I could feel the shock waves from the brute-force strike, which blew a crowd of rebel soldiers off the bridge and into the canal. Jean was unscathed.

"You can hardly be trusted to guard the eastern border if feeble maidens such as ourselves are too much for you," Anna opined to the grand knight as she took in the scene. "I was under the impression the Algrens give their lives to see their duty done, even when they find themselves outmatched."

Hayden didn't respond. Instead, he growled, "You don't use strings, do you?"

"Everyone seems to mistake me for a string-wielder. I can't imagine why," Anna replied, with a melodious little laugh. "Of course, Mr. Allen saw through my technique at first glance and even subjected it to a detailed analysis! Woe is me. He's a natural bully, although you'd never know it to look at him. Lady Lydia adores his teasing despite her grumbling, but I don't enjoy— Oh!" The head maid shivered and pressed her hands to her cheeks as though she'd just discovered the secret truth of life. Fidgeting, she mumbled, "C-Could this be an example of that boyish desire to tease the girl one loves I've heard so much about? O-Oh, but I c-couldn't possibly. I already have my mistress and Lady Lydia and Lady Lynne. But if it were only shopping, meals, and gazing at the nighttime scenery—"

"No!" I shouted before she could spout any more nonsense. "Out of the question! As his sister, I absolutely forbid it!"

"Anna, consider your age," Lord Richard added weakly.

The head maid pouted at us. "Don't be a spoilsport, Miss Caren. And as for you, Young Master Richard...I'll have words with you later." With that, she returned her attention to the old grand knight. "But where are my manners? I've kept you waiting. I have a question for you."

She beamed, and I broke out in goose bumps. It suddenly seemed much colder than before.

"Is Mr. Allen safe?" she demanded. "I believe you should consider your response with care. A wrong answer could be the death warrant of the eastern nobility and everyone else involved in

this Great Folly."

Hayden raised his white eyebrows. "You came all the way from the southern capital to ask that? Surely a fighter of your caliber is needed for war with the league, especially now that the Howards are too preoccupied with the empire to assist."

I felt a tightness in my chest. It wasn't just the eastern capital; the north and south were under attack too!

Anna, however, merely let out a scornful laugh.

"What do you find so amusing?!" the old earl snapped, brandishing his spear.

"Oh, I simply never imagined I'd hear such things from Lord Haig Hayden, a grand knight and one of the Algrens' 'Wings.' Perhaps old age is catching up to you," the head maid replied. She was still smiling, but her voice was a blade of ice. "Do you seriously imagine that my Ducal House of Leinster would lose to the likes of the League of Principalities? Or that the Howards would let a single imperial army get the better of them? Impossible."

Anna gestured with both hands, and the other three maids alighted behind the old grand knight. Farther along the bridge, the tattered remains of the enemy lines were struggling to fend off the water lions.

"The Howards are the 'gods of war,'" the head maid continued. "Several centuries have passed since their house first appeared on the stage of history, yet they remain quite literally undefeated on the battlefield. Their constant companions, the formidable Walkers, still stand strong beside them. And on this occasion, the professor will aid them in earnest. I wouldn't even call it a contest. Still, one other question does concern me: Has the old duke truly forgotten your houses' disgrace at Blood River?"

"Duke Guido has not changed," Hayden answered slowly. "As for Mr. Allen, we took him prisoner...but he was later abducted and taken, I suspect, to the Four Heroes Sea. Whether he still lives, I do not know."

Before I knew what I was doing, I clapped my hands to my mouth. I was shaking like a leaf.

Abducted? Why the Four Heroes Sea? And...he might be dead?

Valery and Shizuku ran over and hugged me tightly from both sides, murmuring my name.

"We've already taken the first step," Hayden declared, readying his spear. "So, on my honor, I will see my duty done! An Angel of

Death you may be, but I will strike you down!"

Anna's gaze was downcast. "Strike *me* down?" she muttered. "You seem to be laboring under a misapprehension."

The wind died, silence fell, and inky black glows began to scatter all around us.

"Do you realize that I...am positively furious?" the head maid asked, slowly raising her head. To our shock, her eyes held profound sorrow. "I feel certain that Lady Lydia is wielding her sword even as we speak. She would not hesitate to forsake everything and race to the one place she belongs—at Mr. Allen's side. And it must break the hearts of my mistress, Lady Lynne, and Lady Lily to see her in that state."

Lydia! But...I know how she feels. I can't help knowing. Allen is always the center of her world.

"From infancy, Lady Lydia had been despised as 'the Leinsters' cursed child.' She cried herself to sleep most nights and had long since forgotten how to smile. But since she met Mr. Allen, she has been full of joy. She truly has! Do you have any idea how great a miracle that was?!"

Allen had written to me about her: "Her hair is short, scarlet, and gorgeous. And her swordplay is just incredible! She acts willful, but deep down she's a lonely crybaby...and a very kind girl." Then, when I'd met her in person, all my suspicions had changed to certainties. Without my brother, she would long since have...

Anna swung her arms out to either side. The jet-black radiance of her mana completely encircled Hayden, cutting off his retreat.

"After her Royal Academy entrance exam, she brought Mr. Allen back to the Leinster residence in the royal capital," she continued. "Oh, the joyous, bashful smile on her face as she frantically sorted through every dress in the house! And my mistress's delight while she watched from the shadows! In all my years in Leinster service, I can never recall weeping as copiously as I did that night. That's what the gentleman you harmed means to me."

Hayden was speechless. Anna's animosity was too intense for a response.

"I have no idea what circumstances drove you gentlemen to commit this Great Folly. As far as I'm concerned, however, Lady Lydia's tears are all that matters. I have only one thing to say to you." Anna raised her left hand heavenward. Four pitch-dark

tornadoes sprang up, surrounding Hayden on all sides.

"Death is too light a punishment for making my lady weep. If the worst should happen, and Lady Lydia's heart should break..." Anna's eyes turned a lightless, dusky jet. The Angel of Death had arrived, wearing a sublime smile even as she filled the air with malice and inky mana. "Don't fool yourself with dreams of a pleasant death. I'll slice and chop and shred you until not so much as a sliver of flesh remains."

"I accept your censure, Angel of Death," Haig Hayden responded slowly. "But I will not retreat! I refuse to!" Still undaunted, he gripped his spear and held himself ready to meet the onslaught.

"In that case, I must insist that you leave the stage n—"

Just then, an emerald flash darted over our heads. A lone old knight dove out of the blue, yelling, "I cannot allow you to take his life!"

The trio of maids sprang into action.

"Ms. Anna!"

"Ma'am!"

"They picked a hell of a time for a sneak attack!"

With scythe, lion, and curved swords, they blocked and deflected the spear thrust aimed at running Anna through.

"Lord Haag Harclay," the head maid said, glaring at the new arrival. "The other Algren 'Wing,' a grand knight, and commander of the Violet Order. I see the trains grinding to a standstill hasn't prevented your return from the royal capital."

"So, the eastern railway sabotage was your doing," Harclay responded. "Forgive me, but we too have orders to carry out—we cannot die yet. Haig! Come to your senses!"

"I don't need reminding!" Hayden answered.

The Two Wings stood side by side. Harclay, who wore his mane of white hair in a loose ponytail, swung his spear in a wide arc, casting Imperial Storm Tornado five times in succession. Hayden followed suit, bringing the number of raging vortexes up to ten.

I felt the storm winds buffet my skin as I ran my hand along my sheath, drew my dagger, and entered the strongest Lightning Apotheosis I could muster. Allen's spell formula supported me, racing along the dark blade and turning it violet. The lightning spear I'd conjured became a massive lance with a cross-shaped head. I felt elated like never before—Allen was protecting me!

In a flash, I was at Anna's side.

"My goodness, Miss Caren. And that dagger..." the head maid said, peering at me.

"So, we couldn't keep you away, Caren," Lord Richard added, sighing as the healers tended to him.

"I am Caren, sister of Allen, of the wolf clan!" I shouted, invoking even more powerful lightning as I thrust my spear forward. "I have a lot of questions for you, and I demand answers!"

The grand knights scowled, muttering, "Atavism" and "Like Shooting Star," but they stood their ground.

Just when the clash was about to begin, all ten tornadoes and the mana lights abruptly blinked out of existence. To all our shock, a flock of sea-green griffins had the Great Bridge surrounded.

"What?" I murmured, stunned.

"Well now," Anna said, evidently intrigued.

Lord Richard didn't speak. His gaze was focused on a single point—the aged, pure-white sea-green griffin that had just alighted in front of me. It wore an ancient collar around its neck, and on its back sat a happily chirping infant creature—the chick that my brother had rescued. I sensed a presence above me and looked to see the mother griffin. This was like something out of *Griffins Pay Their Debts*.

The white griffin ignored the grand knights and approached me, its gaze locked on the dagger I was using as a medium for my magic. When I dispelled my spear, the griffin stretched out its long neck and touched the blade.

A vivid scene flashed into my mind. A wolf-clan sorcerer stood with his back to me, a dagger in his hand. Was that the same dagger I held? Ahead of him, a massive demon army was closing in.

"Thank you for everything," the sorcerer was saying. "Truly. I'm fortunate to have known you—of that, I have no doubt. Now, go. I'm the only one who needs to die here over such folly!"

"I" shouted at him, weeping. So did the thing riding on my back.

A little girl?

A sorcerer wearing a crimson-edged hood advanced to the head of the enemy army.

"Go! Leave me!" the wolf-clan sorcerer shouted. "Give me a ride on your back in my next life, if I have one. Keep an eye on the Great Tree and everyone for me..."

I whispered a name: “Luce.”

The white griffin filled the air with its cry of joy. Tears started to spill from its lustrous golden eyes. The rest of the flock all began deploying wind magic against the old grand knights.

Shooting Star exchanged a lot of promises…and not only with people.

“I’m not the person you miss reborn,” I said. “But will you help me anyway?”

Luce squeezed its eyes shut, spread its white wings, and began to sing. I had a clear view of the design on its collar—a shooting star.

I resummoned my lightning spear. “Taking this spell head-on would be a bad idea,” I warned the grand knights.

An octuple cast of Thunder Fang Spear, the experimental advanced spell that Allen had invented for me! It was the middle of the day, but I still had no trouble seeing the violet-and-white glow of the mana whirling around me.

Hayden and Harclay looked the grimmest I had seen them yet.

“Magical amplification?”

“So, she takes after her brother’s greatness.”

“Take this!” I roared at the top of my lungs, calling eight gigantic, whirling lances of lightning from the sky above.

“Everyone, fall back!” Lord Richard barked.

“Celenissa, Nico, Jean, withdraw!” Anna echoed.

The thunderous crash was like nothing I had ever experienced before. A huge mass plummeted into the canal.

Once I released my Lightning Apotheosis, the griffin chick leapt into my arms, chirping in delight. The old grand knights were nowhere to be seen. They’d probably retreated.

“I don’t believe it,” Lord Richard remarked from behind me. “Have you ever considered a career in the royal guard, Caren?”

“I’m going to the university,” I replied. “I promised Allen and Stella.”

“That’s a shame. Recruits who can demolish the Great Bridge are hard to come by.”

The vast bridge that had spanned the canal ahead of us was no more.

I sheathed my dagger and returned the chick to Luce. “Thank you,” I said. “You were a real lifesaver.”

The white griffin purred and took flight, still singing its song of joy. It seemed willing to help us again.

“Right!” Lord Richard said, clapping his hands. “Let’s not keep the wounded waiting for treatment. Ms. Shima, are Toma and Sui safe?”

“They’re right as rain,” Shima called. “Your Highness, Lord Richard Leinster, thank you for saving my beloved and my comrade. I’m truly, truly grateful.” She bowed deeply, and the rest of the militia did likewise.

Lord Richard scratched the tip of his nose. “Think nothing of it. Anyone would do as much for his brothers-in-arms.”

“Young Master Richard, how you’ve grown,” Anna chimed in. “I’m simply overjoyed! Nico, Jean, remain here and see to the wounded. Celenissa, guard Miss Caren.”

“You got it.”

“Sure thing!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right, then,” Lord Richard said. “Caren, Anna, let’s go. It’s high time we saw the chieftains.”

“I’m with you!” I responded.

“I must pay my respects to Mrs. Ellyn first,” the head maid

demurred. “The mistress entrusted me with a letter for her.” As I followed Lord Richard toward the doors of the Great Tree, she whispered, “Young Master Richard, I don’t suppose you meant to choose an honorable death?”

“Never. Allen left me in charge. I’ll see everyone through this, no matter what it takes,” the red-haired knight replied, his voice soft but firm. Then, he turned his gaze to the other end of the Great Bridge, toward New Town. “On the banks of Blood River, Shooting Star told the survivors, ‘I won’t let you take the easy way out. No matter how desperate things get, I want every last one of you to live out your lives.’ I bet they felt just like we do now. Allen’s a harsh taskmaster—he won’t even let us die without a fuss.”

*

I accompanied Lord Richard into the Great Tree, where Anna caught sight of my mom and raced off to join her. I also spotted Mizuho nearby.

In place of the head maid, Dag and Deg, the former otter-clan chieftain, ran up to us.

“There you are, Lord Red. And you too, Caren.”

“I’d wager you’re headed for the top level. Come with us.”

We nodded and followed them into the center of the huge, circular hall. People crowded around us as Dag and Deg stood directly under the hole in the ceiling and clapped their hands together.

“Right!”

“Here goes!”

They cast botanical spells in unison, and thick vines sprouted from the floor, lifting us into the upper reaches. The plants deposited us on the highest level, at the entrance to the council chamber.

“Wh-What is all this?” I cried, gasping as I took in the scene. Dense ivy covered the chamber door, and countless magical barriers barred the way to it.

Botanical magic!

“What are they playing at?!” Dag demanded, glaring at the obstruction.

“The whole council must have seen!” Deg snapped, equally furious.

I glanced at the red-haired knight, who stood with his arms folded. Lord Richard cracked a mirthless smile. “Celenissa,” he said, with a quick wave of his left hand.

“Yes, my lord.” The pale-scarlet-haired maid stepped in front of us...and sliced through the plants and defenses with one lightning-quick swing of her massive scythe! Then she kicked the door off its hinges! It fell into the room with a resounding crash, revealing Ogi —chieftain of the wolf clan and head of the council—along with the other chieftains, their deputies, and...

What is Toneri’s gang doing here?

Kume of the rat clan was still missing from the group. Something didn’t seem right, so I counted the stunned and haggard chieftains. The wolf, leopard, bearlet, hare, otter, cat, and squirrel clans of Old Town were all accounted for. From New Town, I saw the leaders of the fox, weasel, goat, and ox clans. Where were the ape- and rat-clan chieftains?

Dag and Deg looked as confused as I felt, but Lord Richard and Celenissa strode into the chamber as if they hadn’t a care in the world, so the three of us hurried after them.

Lord Richard stopped before the council table, bowed, and said, “Vice Commander Richard Leinster of the royal guard, at your service. Pardon the intrusion—I got tired of waiting, so I came up to check on your decision in person. Chieftain Ogi, will you invoke the Old Pledge with the Lebuferas?”

Once they got over their astonishment, the chieftains’ faces began to redden. They responded with a chorus of abuse.

“Your father’s title doesn’t excuse this!”

“Absolutely not!”

“The proposal is unprecedented—we need time to consider!”

“How would we even *reach* the western capital?”

“Your house will hear of this outrage!”

“Negotiating with the Algrens is still on the table.”

My mind cooled rapidly as I listened.

What...What are these people doing? What on earth are they talking about?

“Is that so?” Lord Richard said, with a sigh. Then he brought his hands crashing down on the council table and glared daggers at the chieftains. A furious whirl of blazing plumes filled the air. “What have you been doing all this time?! Twiddling your thumbs?!”

The chieftains paled and fell silent, avoiding his gaze. Only two

remained unmoved: Ogi, who was obviously exhausted, and Hatsuho, the hollow-cheeked chieftain of the fox clan. In the corner they'd retreated to, Toneri and his lackeys quaked and covered their ears.

"You've stayed cooped up in your council chamber, never even bothering to visit the wounded on the lower levels," Lord Richard raged. "You haven't taken command of the defense, and you can't make up your minds about anything. You've given us nothing but excuses. Do you expect me to believe this is how the beastfolk council operates, Ogi? Enough is enough! Will you sit here 'debating' while the Great Tree burns down around your ears?!"

Ogi's face was the very picture of anguish, but at last, he forced himself to speak. "Your Highness, please be calm."

"Calm?" Lord Richard repeated, with an exaggerated show of confusion. "I'm simply asking a question: The situation is hopeless; what will you do about it?"

"The Algrens broke their Old Pledge," Ogi replied heavily. "What's to show the Lebuferas will honor theirs? But that's a moot point if we can't reach them, and it's a long way to the western capital. Negotiating with the Algrens might still yield—"

"Why not leave it at that, Young Master Richard?" asked a chilly voice from behind us. "I believe you're wasting your time."

I turned and saw Anna.

"I am Anna, head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster," she said, with an elegant curtsy. "I daresay history is repeating itself. As you may recall, two hundred years ago, your ancestors spent the night before the final battle with the Dark Lord in pointless argument and delayed sending their main force to Blood River...until after they'd let Shooting Star perish."

The chieftains stiffened in consternation.

The beastfolk stood by and let Shooting Star die? I turned to Dag and Deg, and found sour looks on the old otters' faces.

"In the aftermath of the battle, there were whispers among many of the soldiers. 'The beastfolk thought Shooting Star would become a nuisance if he survived the war, since he didn't hail from the eastern capital, so they wasted a day in council. That delayed messengers to the dwarves and giants, who arrived late to the battle as well.' Did you know that? But be that as it may..." The head maid surveyed the room, making a show of counting those present. "Your council appears to be shorthanded. How do you account for

the absent chieftains?"

Once again, a heavy silence fell over the council.

What could they be—

The stranded residents of New Town hadn't evacuated to the canals because of orders from the Great Tree.

It couldn't be. Th-There's…There's no way!

"I take it that there were traitors among the chieftains of both districts," Anna concluded. "And that those young gentlemen were involved."

Despair spread over the chieftains' faces, and Toneri's gang shuddered.

Hold on.

"Is that why you haven't left the top level since the rebellion broke out?!" I screamed. "You couldn't bring yourselves to admit we had traitors, and that some of them were chieftains?! Do you have any idea how many people got killed or injured while you were hiding up here?! And Allen, my big brother… What…What was it all for?" I gripped the hilt of my dagger. "I'll make you pay." But just as I made to draw it, I felt the supporting formula on the sheath.

Allen.

"Is this true, Ogi?" Lord Richard demanded coldly.

"Chieftains Nishiki of the ape clan and Yono of the rat clan were in league with the rebels," Ogi admitted slowly. "Both vanished several days ago, and a number of ancient texts held under lock and key went with them. As if that wasn't bad enough, my empty-headed son and several other sons of chieftains seem to have sent false information to parts of New Town on the first day of the rebellion." He buried his face in his hands.

Most of the other chieftains were ashen, while Toneri and his cronies curled up, hugging their knees.

Anna waved her hand. "I haven't come here to condemn you," she said, looking at Ogi, "but after repeating the mistakes of the past, I suggest you resign yourselves to the censure of history. Have you forgotten *why* your ancestors arrived late to Blood River? They were paralyzed with suspicion after some of their number defected to the demonfolk."

The chieftains hung their heads, quaking.

A beastfolk clan sided with the demons?

Anna sighed. "'If only Shooting Star had lived!' I can't tell you

how often I heard those words once the war was over. So long as there are people, many will distinguish themselves...but true legends, able to change the world for the better, are in short supply. I trust you've heard that Mr. Allen has fallen into enemy hands? He is truly a new Shooting Star! And to sit by and watch Shooting Star die twice would surely be a...stain on the beastfolk's reputation."

"Your maid speaks as if she saw what happened two hundred years ago for herself," grumbled the weasel-clan chieftain. He was grasping at straws.

"And why wouldn't I?" Anna asked, touching her right index finger to her chin and tilting her head in mock confusion. "I served in the War of the Dark Lord, and I fought in the Battle of Blood River—although I never had the honor of conversing with Shooting Star himself."

The greatest shock of the day settled over the chamber.

J-Just how old is An—

The head maid turned and cut my speculation short with a smiling "Miss Caren, you shouldn't pry into a maiden's secrets."

Right.

Lord Richard was just about to speak up when a fox-clan girl with dark-gray hair entered the chamber, clutching an old book.

"I'd like to speak to the head of the council, please," Lotta said haltingly.

Hatsuho of the fox clan stood in the doorway, along with her young daughters, Ine and Chiho. She bobbed her head to Anna.

The girl walked up to the table and looked Ogi in the eye. "My name is Lotta of the fox clan, and I live in the Great Tree orphanage," she continued. "These girls really want to tell you something, sir. Would you please listen to them? 'The head of the council of chieftains must lend an ear to all the beastfolk.' Isn't that right?"

Has she been looking that up all this time?

Ogi nodded gravely. "I'll hear them out."

"Thank you very much. Come on, you two. Tell him."

"Okay!" The girls nodded. After a look at their mother, they stepped away from her and joined Lotta, hand in hand. Then, they made their request to Ogi.

"Please help the nice man who put me on the boat!"

"Please help the nice man who brought my big sister back."

Total silence fell over the council chamber. At length, Ogi

wordlessly stood up, opened a safe behind him, and took out a little box, which he placed on the table. The other chieftains drew in their breath. “We have been mistaken,” he said slowly. “We can’t let little children bear our burdens. This cannot go on! I call on the council to invoke the Old Pledge with the Ducal House of Lebufera!”

The chieftains shouted in agreement, as if they’d just been freed from an enchantment.

“Aye!”

“Aye.”

“I’m with Ogi.”

“We won’t get through this without risking our necks.”

Ogi opened the box. Inside lay a scrap of black cloth—supposedly a memento from Shooting Star to his trusted lieutenant. The stories were true.

“The question is how to carry this to the western capital,” Ogi continued. “Your Highness, Ms. Anna, whom would you trust with this mission?”

“Caren gets my vote,” Lord Richard replied.

“Miss Caren is the only choice,” Anna added without a moment’s hesitation.

I wavered, taken aback by the sudden nomination. I’d meant to stay and fight.

In a corner of the room, Toneri staggered to his feet. “Dad,” he said haltingly, “let me go. Otherwise, I’ll…I’ll…”

“Toneri.” Ogi grimaced. His son had never been a good person by any stretch, but he hadn’t been outright evil either. What had driven him?

Lord Richard strode up to Toneri and, without warning, drew his sword. The boy collapsed in a terrified heap as a few strands fell from his bangs.

“You fail,” the knight pronounced. “Toma and Sui told me a bit about you: ‘He had promise—more than Allen did as a tyke—but he stopped trying to improve himself.’ It appears they were right.”

“Y-You…You think you know me?!” Toneri screamed, stung.

“No, I don’t. And I don’t *want* to know anyone who’d offer up his own people to the enemy.”

Lotta, Chiho, and Ine clung to me, frightened by the scathing retort.

He really is a Leinster.

Lord Richard stared down at Toneri. “Caren could have not only blocked that strike but been ready with an advanced spell afterward. Allen would have stood there, not even flinching, and pointed out that I wasn’t trying to hit him. You haven’t even set foot in the arena. I think I know just what my commander would say to you: ‘Start over from scratch.’”

Toneri gritted his teeth, hung his head, and started sobbing.

The red-haired knight turned back to Ogi. “If I remember correctly, the Lebuferas pledged to grant whoever comes bearing that black cloth any wish in their power. Ogi, what will you ask for?”

All eyes turned to the head of the council, who brought his hands together and solemnly proclaimed his answer. When he finished, I was stunned. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

I never...I never thought I’d live to see the day.

Dag and Deg let out hearty guffaws, crying, “Spread word down below!” and “Time to make up for our ancestors’ shame!”

Lord Richard was beaming too. “It looks like I won’t have to give up my admiration for the beastfolk after all. Caren, our message to the west is in your hands! Ogi, fill her in on the details.”

*

I took the black cloth from Ogi, folded it up, and sealed it inside Allen’s pocket watch with the most secure magic I knew. Then, I returned to the lower levels. Word had already spread, and the Great Tree was abuzz.

“I don’t believe it.”

“It really exists, then.”

“Will she be all right? She’s so young.”

“I hear Chieftain Ogi will explain everything later.”

I passed through the murmuring crowds to the entrance, shepherded by Anna and Celenissa. The people parted like a sea before us.

Outside, everyone who had fought for the Great Tree stood assembled: the knights of the royal guard, the militia, the volunteers, and even Jean and Nico, our reinforcements from the southern capital. Sea-green griffins wheeled overhead, and I had no trouble picking out Luce’s snowy plumage amid the flock.

Suddenly, two voices cried, “Caren!” and my white-robed old

friends threw their arms around me. I saw tears in their eyes, although they were normally so upbeat.

"Kaya, Koko," I said, forcing myself to smile. "Don't worry! I'll be back in no time!"

They hugged me tighter without saying a word, then stepped back and nodded to each other.

Footfalls alerted me to the arrival of two sea-green griffins. The mother had a saddle on her back, and her chick was riding on it. The father followed behind, along with the artificers, who must have rigged the harness. The pair stopped in front of me. Then the father griffin picked up the chick in his yellow beak and deposited it on his own back before twining his long neck with the mother's as if to say, "Take care."

Someone draped a pale-violet coat over my shoulders. I turned to look and saw...

"Caren."

My mom, holding a cloth bag. She hugged me tight and looked me in the eye.

"Allen is alive," I said. "I just know he is! So this time, I—*we*—need to help *him*! That's why...I'm going to the western capital!"

"You take care, now. And take this with you. Keep it close." With a look of anguish, my mom handed me the bag and her own amulet. I took them without protest. Then she buried her face in my chest and started sobbing. What could I do but hug her back?

My dad joined us and handed me a palm-sized magical trinket.

"What's this?" I asked, puzzled.

"I put it together in a hurry. It will point the way to the western capital," he replied. "I suppose I ought to stop you. After what happened to Allen..."

"Dad, mom." I stepped away from my mom, took a good look at my beloved parents, and bowed deeply. "I'm sorry for worrying you. But I want to save Allen—to rescue my big brother! So please...have faith in me."

They both squeezed me in a gentle embrace.

"You were so small not long ago," my dad murmured. "But I believe in you, Caren."

"When did you get so big?" my mom added. "I believe in you too. After all, I'll always be your mother."

"Thank you...so much." Tears blurred my vision. My parents tenderly stroked my head, then released me.

Lord Richard came out of the Great Tree with Shima, Mizuho, Lotta, Ine, and Chiho.

"We'll look after things here, Caren," Shima promised. "You made it a lot easier when you brought the Great Bridge crashing down." Her ample chest was swelling with pride. I supposed that Sui and Toma were in the infirmary.

"I think we can hold out a while longer," Lord Richard added. "And now Anna's here, I can take a well-earned break from—"

"Dear me! Your Highness means to overtax we mere, feeble maids? Oh, how my war wounds ache." Anna pretended to swoon, and Lord Richard raised his hands in surrender. Everyone chuckled.

"Do you have the route down, Caren?" he continued. "First, make for Margrave Solnhofen's house in the western capital. There's a huge dead tree on the grounds—you can't miss it. After that—"

"Request an audience with Former Duchess Leticia Lebufera, who was Shooting Star's adjutant, right?"

"I've only met her once, but she's a good person," he confirmed. "News of the rebellion must have reached the western capital by now, and they're sure to have summoned her."

I nodded. After a slight wave to Lotta, Ine, and Chiho, I stroked the mother griffin's neck and peered into her golden eyes. "It will be a long trip, but I can't make it without you."

She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed herself against me, happily urging me to hurry up.

All right! Time to get going!

I adjusted my school beret, put on my coat, and stowed Allen's watch in an inner pocket. Then, cloth bag in hand, I hopped astride the mother griffin.

"I swear I'll come back with help!" I shouted to all present. "Hold out until I do!"

"Give Caren a proper send-off!" Lord Richard barked, and the royal guard saluted me. I returned the gesture. The militia, volunteers, and others waved to me as well.

The mother griffin spread her wings and took flight. The father soared beside us with their chick on his back. We kept climbing until we emerged above the Great Tree, where Luce and several hundred more sea-green griffins were waiting for us. The flock formed up behind us...and began to sing.

Amplification magic!

The mother griffin's wings began to emit a pale glow. Then she

beat the air powerfully and shot forward, trailing magical radiance as she rapidly gained speed. We were on our way to the western capital and its rulers, the Ducal House of Lebufera!

A mighty tailwind drove us onward as I clutched Allen's pocket watch tight.

Chapter 3

I groaned. The protruding salt deposits on the dungeon floor did nothing to ease my slow crawl across it. The fiery serpent that had slain the knights of the Holy Spirit in a single strike was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't sense its mana either.

I was in rough shape. The blows that the gray-robed man—Gregory Algren's confidant, Lev—had struck across my back with his staff were especially worrisome. I needed to find some way of getting my arms free and removing the bracelets that kept my mana sealed. I doubted that I'd been in this much pain...

"Since that fight with the black dragon," I muttered weakly to myself.

Lydia would force me to take a week of bed rest if she saw me like this. "You're unbelievable," she would say. "Ridiculous. A complete dolt. How could you get yourself hurt while I'm not around? Don't you dare get hurt when you're with me either!" And with that, the highborn crybaby would weep herself to sleep.

I couldn't allow my students—Tina, Ellie, and Lynne—to see me in such a pitiful state. I could picture them glued to my bedside, holding back tears as they murmured, "Sir," "Allen, sir," and "Dear brother." Adorable, to be sure, but what kind of tutor would I be if I caused them such concern? I had already given them quite enough to worry about in recent days.

As for Stella... "Mr. Allen, please do nothing but rest until you're fully recovered. I'll watch over you the whole time. I've been beside myself with worry." She would clutch my sleeve and refuse to let go.

Caren wouldn't overlook that. "Why are you making Stella nurse you?" she would demand. "That's *my* sisterly duty! It's the way of the world!" Then, for all her angry muttering and violet sparks, she would wipe my back with a damp cloth.

Felicia would probably have the biggest overreaction, although she would try not to show it. "Allen, why do you insist on overdoing it?" she would ask, with a sigh. "You're a lost cause.

Now, I'll order medicine from all corners of the continent. I need you well again soon! And whatever you do, don't do any work in your sickroom—although *I* certainly will!"

I could picture my bedside piled high with costly medicines. What a flagrant abuse of authority!

As my imagination ran away with me, I couldn't help but crack a grin.

Good. If I can smile, I'm not so bad off yet.

I need to make it back to them, no matter what. Making them sad is the last thing I want to do. I can't die—not until I find a way to free the great spells from Tina and Lydia and repay mom, dad, and Caren for everything they've done for me. And I need to talk with Gil; I'm sure he's been blaming himself this whole time.

Little by little, I made my way through the darkness, toward something that possessed a staggering quantity of mana. Strangely, I sensed no malice. If it wanted to kill me, it would have done so already.

"There's something familiar about this mana. It reminds me of Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin," I muttered to myself, leaning my back against a wall. With a grunt, I rose and staggered forward, one step at a time. I ignored the searing pain; it was within my tolerance.

All of a sudden, mana lamps lit upon either side of me. Before me stood...

"A door?"

To my rear, I dimly sensed mana under tight control—the fiery serpent, I supposed.

I raised my braceleted arms and said, "Thank you for your help earlier. However, with my magic sealed, I doubt I'll be of much use to—"

A flash of scarlet light bisected the bracelets. What remained of them clattered to the floor, leaving my wrists unscathed. The spell had been both far more powerful and far more precise than the one imbued in the dagger Gerard had wielded. A shiver ran through me, although that didn't stop me from casting the elementary spell Divine Light Healing. My physical pain subsided to a bearable level.

While I was at it, I scooped the fragments of bracelet off the floor and pocketed them. "The inquisitorial curse baked into it will kill you in ten days," one of the gray robed men who'd brought me here had said. Checking my wrists in the dim light, I found them

marked with ominous, pulsating designs.

"Removing the bracelets doesn't lift the curse, then," I mused. If the sorcerer was to be believed, I had ten days left to live.

Ten days?

Something about that rang a bell. Nevertheless, I turned around...to look up at a massive snake of fire taller than I was. "Thank you," I said. "Shall I enter?"

The serpent's deep-crimson eyes flashed, and fire spells I'd never seen before began to unfold. The message was clear: "Keep going or I'll shoot."

I was caught between a creature of unfathomable mana and a snake armed with bone-chilling fire magic. Back up on the surface, the Knights of the Holy Spirit had me surrounded, and Lev was no amateur. I, meanwhile, had at best a tenth of my usual strength. Attempting to break out would be an exercise in futility. Yet holing up would do me no good either—I'd die when my ten days ran out. My only way was forward.

I steeled myself and threw my weight against the old door.

It opened into a breathtakingly vast chamber. Mana lamps still glowed along the walls, meaning that visibility wouldn't be an issue. I turned my attention to the far side of the room and saw...a gargantuan pure-white fox, crouched with its limbs in baleful dark-gray shackles.

The fox raised its head. Our eyes met. It howled.

The tremendous sound caused a shock wave that made the mana lamps flicker and sent violet sparks crackling through the chamber. Acting on instinct, I cast the elementary spell Divine Earth Wall several times over. No sooner had I hunkered down than the blast filled the air around me with shards of broken wall.

"Th-That could have gone better," I muttered.

Twelve of my thirteen walls had been utterly demolished. Cracks ran halfway through the one left standing. I couldn't *begin* to calculate how much mana had gone into that!

The white fox was trying to stand, straining against its chains, but the dusky restraints fought back with a burst of sinister mana. I knew that magic, and it brought my loathing to the fore. It was the derivative of Radiant Shield and Resurrection employed by Gerard and Gaucher, the knight of the Holy Spirit whom Caren and I had defeated in the eastern capital. Meaning that the church's reach extended even—

With a piercing roar that shook the walls of the chamber, the fox collapsed. I covered my ears. And then, it hit me: Could the beast be...screaming? I realized why the snake had driven me into this room—it wanted me to break the chains.

I peered over my stone wall at the fox. The shackles seemed to have it too pinned down to move much. It was growling and shaking, perhaps in pain.

I recalled a lesson my dad had taught me as a small child. “You can forget the things you’ve done,” he had said, “but never forget what others do for you.” And since the snake had removed my bracelets for me...it behooved me to return the favor.

Dad, I’ve never gone against your teachings yet. What kind of son would I be if I started now?

My mind was made up. Yet the fox’s mana still vastly overshadowed mine. Even at my best, I might not have been able to reach the far side of the chamber—and I was far from my best. After letting out a long breath, I sprang from behind my wall.

The fox couldn’t stand, but it howled, and the tips of its pure-white fur turned violet as it cast a lightning spell the likes of which I’d never seen. Eight pillars of electricity bore down on me, dominating the room. I attempted interference, but I’d never make it in time—I lacked the mana, and the spell’s encryption shifted as though it were alive. And no magic at my disposal would suffice to block or divert the onslaught. That left just one option!

I poured what little mana I could muster into a wind spell. Then, throwing up a lightning-resistant barrier, I sprinted through the narrow gap between the crackling pillars. I only brushed past the lightning for a moment, but it still dealt me an excruciating blow. A sharp grunt of pain escaped me. Nevertheless, I made it through to the fox!

The chains are connected to the wall. If I can touch them directly, I should be able to—

“Oh, well, I suppose that was too much to hope for,” I murmured as the fox raised its quivering bulk and prepared to cast another spell.

The floating formula was the epitome of precision, and it blazed with electricity as it took aim at me. The amount of mana it contained easily surpassed the rays that Gaucher had fired after transforming himself with Resurrection and Radiant Shield. I couldn’t contend with this magic alone.

Slowly, I raised my hands and looked directly into the white fox's golden eyes. "I don't want to hurt you," I said. "I might be able to free you from those chains. Please, trust me."

Abruptly, every light in the room went out. They hadn't run out of mana—this was interference! Before I could react, I found myself pinned to the floor with a harsh metallic clang. A scream escaped me, but I was helpless to move.

When the light returned, the fox was staring down at me, its sharp fangs bared. I saw intense wariness in its eyes.

Oh dear. Between pain and lack of mana, I think I might black out.

With great effort, I managed to brush my fingers against a chain and attempted to insinuate myself into its magic.

Ugh. What is this thing? It's made to tighten every time the fox moves. What were they trying to do, tear its legs off? This is no way to treat a living creature!

Using all my remaining mana, I forced my way into a single chain...and severed it. The shackle fell with a resounding crash, and I heard the floor crack under it.

The white fox removed its right foreleg from me in apparent bewilderment. The bloodied limb was painful to look at.

"Did that earn me...a little trust?" I asked weakly, forcing myself to smile as my vision went dark.

It's no use. I can't lift a finger anymore. I'd really...rather not die yet.

The first thing that struck my senses when I woke, groaning, was the dim light of the mana lamps. Apparently, the fox had opted not to eat me on the spot. There was no sign of the snake either.

That reminded me of a remark that a certain sweet-toothed girl had once made to me: "Hm. You wouldn't make a tasty treat now. You ought to be sweeter to me."

You know, Alice, I don't go out for dessert with girls who say things like that.

Though only half awake, I managed to lever myself into a sitting position. Just then, with a clink of metal, a teary-eyed little beastfolk girl in white flung her arms around me.

My stupefied "Pardon?" was entirely out of place in these surroundings. I caught the girl—a reflex born of habit—but my mind was in a whirl.

Wh-What's a young Caren doing here?!

I goggled at the girl in the murky light, then shook my head. “No, you’re not my sister. Her hair has never been this long or this pale, and your ears and tail are different too. In fact, with your golden eyes, you almost look like...” I trailed off, overwhelmed by memories of Atra, the fox-clan girl who had died shielding her younger sister when we were children.

The little girl didn’t respond. Silently, she showed me her left wrist. It was manacled—or rather, a shackle bit into it deeply enough to draw blood. Similar chains bound her legs. Tears dripped from her big eyes as she shook her head in protest.

Rage boiled up inside me. Without hesitation, I intervened in the chains’ magic, ignoring the searing pain and a revolting sensation like little bugs crawling all over my body. Parts of the spell formulae bore a marked resemblance to Gaucher’s.

I can do this!

I channeled all my strength into collapsing the spell. The shackles on the girl’s legs and left wrist split open and fell to the floor, where they disintegrated into sinister dark-gray light.

My next act was to cast silent first-aid spells on the girl’s wounds. My treatment would leave scars—I needed to get her outside and find someone to deluge her in advanced healing magic soon.

Then there were the eerily pulsating designs on her wrists and ankles. I took those for curses, given their resemblance to the marks on my own wrists. Lifting maledictions was an extremely advanced—not to mention mana-intensive—branch of magic. Few people were capable of performing it. The professor and headmaster could, but no one else in my immediate circle. I had jotted an experimental purification spell in Stella’s notebook, but I doubted she had mastered it yet.

While I stewed in my gloomy thoughts, the little girl gave me a look of stunned disbelief. She shed more tears as she hugged me tight.

“My name is Allen,” I said. “What’s yours?”

The girl went on weeping into my chest. Her ears were twitching, so maybe she could understand me but couldn’t speak.

She was shackled and looks fox-clan, I reflected, accepting her display without resistance. *Her hair is white with pale violet at the very tips, and her eyes are golden.*

“Even her mana matches that fox’s,” I mused.

The girl gave me a questioning look.

"Don't worry. I'm sorry about earlier."

She shook her head repeatedly and then slumped, dejected. Apparently, she wanted to apologize.

I was right—she is *that white fox.*

The girl kept glancing at her own hands and feet.

"Does it still hurt?" I asked. "If only I were a little better at healing magic."

With a series of exaggerated gestures, she indicated that I needn't worry.

She really does remind me of a young Caren, I thought, giving her head a gentle rub in thanks. *Oh, her hair feels different, though.*

The girl acted ticklish, but she still happily nuzzled her head against my hand.

Now, as pleasant as this is…

I crouched to look straight into her beautiful, lustrous eyes. "I need to leave this place," I said, "but scary people are waiting at the entrance, and I can't get past them. Do you know another way out?"

The girl hopped and tugged on my hands in happy excitement. Her wrists were still bleeding. My healing, it seemed, wasn't up to the task.

"Wait a moment," I called to the girl, who seemed eager to set out.

She halted, albeit reluctantly, so I gave her a pat on the head. Using wind magic, I cut a relatively intact section from my tattered robe, then sliced it again lengthwise to create impromptu bandages.

"Would you let me see your wrists and ankles?" I asked, smiling as I crouched back down to her eye level. "I'd like to tie these on you."

She obediently held out her arms and legs one by one. I washed each with water magic before binding it—not too tightly—with a cloth strip and casting another silent healing spell.

"That should do for now, but let's get you a proper doctor once we make it out of here."

The girl took a baffled look at her bandages, then started running laps around me in evident delight. She was a little bundle of energy. Still, how had she come to be imprisoned in a place like this?

"The seal of the Fire Fiend," I mused, recalling what Lev had said when he'd hurled me into the cell. "I believe a pioneer in taboo

magic went by that name. And this is a ruin in the Four Heroes Sea, older than the War of the Dark Lord. Could it be...her laboratory?"

While my thoughts finally started falling into place, the girl latched on to my right hand and tugged. She was apparently telling me to "Hurry up!"

I could see another door up ahead, and I supposed I would need to take it. There was nowhere else to go. At least there was nothing evil about the girl. I would trust her, I decided, as she cheerfully led me by the hand even farther into the depths.

A tardy "Well now" was all I could manage after beholding what lay in the next chamber. The inky blackness of the yawning gulf took my breath away. Mana lamps lined the walls, but their feeble light didn't even come close to illuminating the bottom.

Can we make it down?

I hesitated, and the girl gave my hand another tug, utterly unafraid. Her ears and tail expressed impatience with my dawdling. Still, I couldn't help getting cold feet.

When I didn't move, the girl got tired of waiting. She let go of my hand and marched straight into the pit. I let out a startled cry, but she was gone. I couldn't sense so much as a trace of her mana.

I tried conjuring several glows and dropping them over the edge, but they revealed nothing. The darkness almost seemed to devour the light. If I wanted to know what was down there, I would need to go myself.

"Nothing else for it, I suppose," I muttered, scratching my head.

After preparing a levitation spell to activate at a moment's notice, I stepped into the pit—or I was about to when, out of the blue, I felt the tug of a little hand. The shock nearly gave me a heart attack. Yet my aggrieved "Hey!" was lost on the little girl before me, who seemed to be having the time of her life.

I had stumbled forward onto an invisible stairway. And although I had only taken a single step, the lip of the pit was completely out of sight above me. What was going on?

The steps under my feet seemed firm. All around us, faint lights flitted to and fro. I felt as though I had been hurled inside the celestial globe I had once demonstrated for the students of the Royal Academy.

"Are these the same sort of lights that fly around the Great Tree during the Spirit Sending?" I wondered hesitantly.

The girl set off in high spirits. Lights swirled up from the ground at her feet, like countless stars bathing us in their pale radiance.

Is this…a kind of magic?

"Incredible," I murmured in frank admiration. Despite our predicament, I felt a thrill run up my spine, and I couldn't help smiling. I didn't know who had built this place, but their magical artistry was beyond anything I could currently comprehend. How did it all work?

I could practically hear an exasperated Lydia snapping, "Honestly, there's a time and a place! Have you forgotten that you nearly died? Or that you might still die ten days from now? Have some sense of urgency! *Must* you chase after every new spell you see?!"

Oh, well…I know I get carried away.

The girl shot a curious look back at me, then gave my hand

another exuberant tug.

Now, I wonder what's waiting at the bottom.

*

I had been descending the invisible spiral staircase for some time, yet the bottom remained nowhere in sight. Only the pale glows that danced from each step I descended and the magical lights I had conjured relieved the inky blackness. If I'd been alone, fear might have gotten the better of me. Yes, *if* I'd been alone.

The little fox-eared girl holding my left hand gave me a puzzled look. The gesture, like so much about her, reminded me of a young Caren.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "I'm fine."

The girl beamed.

Fortunately, I had recovered enough mana to conjure water. With it, I had quenched my thirst and washed off a bit of grime. And, I thought as I glanced at the bandages on the girl's wrists and ankles, it had allowed me to clean her wounds.

"Do your hands and feet hurt?" I asked, in response to another questioning look from her.

She shook her head.

"Good. Still, this staircase seems to go on forever."

The girl merely gave my hand a playful tug and went on leading the way. She hadn't willingly let go of my hand once since she'd first taken it. Even when I'd dressed her wounds, she had given me trouble by tearfully trying to hang on.

She really is just like Caren used to be.

Nevertheless, the descent was starting to wear me out. "How about a short break?" I suggested.

The girl nodded vigorously, so I sat down on the spot and stretched out my legs. Every part of me ached, and no healing spell I could cast would fully cure serious wounds.

"Hm? What's the matter?" I asked, in answer to the girl's determined stare. "Oh, you want to sit on my lap? All right, come here."

She clambered onto me, face all aglow, and plunked herself down with a look of bliss. I stroked her head while I reflected on my predicament.

After our battle in New Town, Earl Haig Hayden had taken me

prisoner. I dimly recalled the elderly grand knight, along with Earl Zaur Zani, peering down at me while they harangued their troops.

"Listen well," the knight had said. "A true knight is one who uplifts the weak, casts down the mighty, and risks his life for others with a smile. Never forget that, young knights. A man like Mr. Allen here...should be a model you strive to emulate all the days of your lives!"

"As a sorcerer, no one in the east equals his finesse!" the old sorcerer had continued. "And what inner strength he possesses! Our kingdom is home to many spellcasters, but I know none better. Young sorcerers, you have long lives ahead of you. If you set yourselves a goal, it should be him."

I never knew how embarrassing it can be to have someone heap praises on me when I can't retort. I should try it on the girls sometime. But be that as it may...

As far as I'd been able to tell, the earls hadn't wanted to take my life. Along with old Earl Harclay, who was in the royal capital, they were the mainstays of the Algren military—loyal knights and sorcerers from the good old days. Of course, that was probably why they had felt the need to join in this debacle.

Then Lev had turned up with his knights and inquisitors of the Holy Spirit and whisked me away to this place—the Four Heroes Sea, unless I'd missed my guess. Given the jolts I'd suffered on the journey and the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, the Algrens had never invested in air travel, we must have come most of the way by carriage. And working backward from the number of unpalatable meals I'd received led me to...a most distressing conclusion.

At worst, it had been ten days or more since the outbreak of the rebellion. That was more than enough time for Lydia to go berserk, even with the ribbon I'd entrusted to Sir Ryan Bor of the royal guard. She could be surprisingly quick to lose her head at times like this. Unless I could somehow let her know that I was alive—

The little girl had started staring hard at me again.

"Yes? Is something the matter?" I asked.

She responded with wild gesticulations.

"Oh, did I say that out loud? You see, there's this young lady I know. She's kind but a real crybaby, and I need to hurry back home because she's probably been crying all this time. Besides, my sister is waiting for me too. You remind me of her."

The girl looked questioning.

"My adorable little sister," I elaborated. "Her name is Caren. I'll introduce you once we get out of here."

She gave me an exuberant hug. How charmingly expressive she was.

Who on earth had put those horrible chains on this child? The spell formulae proved that either the Church or Knights of the Holy Spirit were involved. But this was the Duchy of Algren, and the girl's shackles had obviously been at least a few years old. I doubted that old Duke Guido Algren, a loyal subject of the crown, would have allowed the church access. And above all, no ordinary knight or sorcerer could have gotten past that serpent.

Naturally, I had no illusions that this girl was an ordinary beastfolk. No person could survive for years chained up as she had been. As for what she really was, I had my suspicions.

But all of that could wait until we'd made our escape! If I didn't get out of here posthaste, Lydia would charge in, slice everything to ribbons, and incinerate the whole area—maybe even the whole island—to destroy the evidence. After that...I would be in for another abduction. There would be no reasoning with her. Given the location, I found it frighteningly easy to imagine her hauling me straight north over the Four Heroes Sea to Lalannoy. Headlines proclaiming, "Lady Lydia Leinster defects to the republic!" would be no laughing matter.

Tina and Ellie would be all right—Stella was with them. Our saint was a hard worker with a good head on her shoulders. She would keep her sisters under control and wouldn't do anything too rash herself.

All this must have been hardest on Lynne. Lydia unfortunately tended to get tunnel vision when she felt anxious.

Felicia was with Emma and the other maids, so she had probably escaped the royal capital and made it south. I only hoped that she hadn't ruined her health in the process.

That left...

I rubbed the girl's head a little roughly, and she gave a start.

"You didn't like that?" I asked. But she seemed happy enough. "In that case, how about this?!" I rubbed even harder, and the child wriggled happily on my lap.

After Lydia, Caren was the most likely to lose her head at a time like this. In her words, "A sister is duty bound to protect her

brother!" But speaking as her big brother, I sincerely wished that my little sister would stay safe and sound.

Were our parents safe? My heart ached when I remembered our parting on the bridge before the Great Tree. But I didn't regret it. If I had to do it over again, I would make the same choice every time. If not for my parents and Caren, my life would have ended long ago —the time had simply come to return the favor.

As for Richard...I had better steer clear of him for the time being. He was more hot-blooded than he let on and would doubtless come out swinging at our next meeting. Bertrand and his comrades might do likewise. They were bound to be furious after I had shoved them into the canal at the bitter end.

The little girl began to sing, and the pale lights around us danced as though they were alive. Meanwhile, my thoughts continued apace.

The rebellion would be quashed in short order. The Algrens and their eastern vassals hadn't marched out on campaign in two centuries. Their logistical apparatus thus paled in comparison to that of the other three ducal houses. Even if they managed to occupy the royal capital, I doubted that they would be able to hold it. They might ship supplies by rail, but that would do them no good on its own—they would still need to unload, store, and distribute the freight. And maintaining such a system long-term would be a monumental undertaking. I very much doubted the rebel leader, Grant Algren, appreciated the difficulty of his task.

On a purely tactical level, the difference was even greater. No army on the continent could defeat the Leinsters and Howards on the battlefield. The League of Principalities and the Yustinian Empire might try to take advantage of the rebellion, but even then, those two formidable ducal houses could brush them aside without difficulty if they set their minds to it.

I recalled a conversation I'd once had in that café with the sky-blue roof. While wolfing down one of their specialty tarts, a girl with short platinum-blonde hair had happily—although without apparent interest—lectured to me on the international balance of power. "Sheep can't beat doggies with wolves to lead them; they're just breakfast," I believed she had said. And "Bunnies can't beat birdies with eagles to lead them; they're just dinner."

Alice, I'd like to repay you for your help during that fight with the black dragon, although I realize that aiding the Hero may be too much

to hope for. And of course, I know you won't get involved in petty human squabbles. Now, where was I?

Ultimately, the western ducal house of Lebufera wouldn't even need to intervene. Yet they would—if the beastfolk invoked the Old Pledge. Not everyone had forgotten their debts and their history. Still...remembering the council of chieftains as I'd last seen them put me in a gloomy frame of mind. By now, they must have been—

"Whoa!"

The girl on my lap finished singing and pressed her hands to my cheeks in high dudgeon. She apparently resented my lack of attention.

"Sorry," I said. "I'll make it up to you...like this!"

She looked surprised and then chirped in delight as I stood up, lifting her piggyback style. She was unbelievably light.

"Now, let's go."

From her perch on my back, she answered with a song of perfect contentment. She really did seem to behave just like Caren used to.

I need to hurry back—back to where I belong.

With renewed purpose, I resumed my trek down the spiral staircase.

*

"Is this the bottom, do you think?" I wondered aloud when step after invisible step at last gave way to reassuringly firm ground.

But while we had left the staircase, our surroundings remained utterly dark. I conjured several floating lights, but they failed to illuminate the way ahead. The pale, dancing glows were gone as well.

As near as I could determine using wind magic, we were in another large space, although not as vast as the hall above. Of course, I couldn't be certain we were even in the same tower. What if we had been teleported without realizing it? Touching the walls put an end to that worry—they were damp with patches of salt water. At the same time, what I found on them unsettled me.

"The walls are covered in ancient spell formulae," I muttered. "Could they be the same as the ones in the eastern capital's underground waterways?"

The girl poked her head over my shoulder to stare.

“It’s all right,” I assured her. After washing my hands with a water spell, I gave her a pat on the head. She had taken a liking to piggyback rides, if her musical little cries were anything to go by. I made a mental note to give her a ride on my shoulders too if we ever got out of here.

Then, I set her down and bent to look her in the eye. “Is this where you wanted to take me?”

Her answering gesture, which made use of her whole body, was an unambiguous “Yes!”

“All right, then,” I said, with a smile and a nod. “Would you lead the way?”

She gave another chirp and shot off, tugging me along by my right hand. She seemed to know just where she was going. Her ears and tail waved, cheerful and fearless, and she showed no trace of the tears she’d shed at our first meeting.

I followed, keeping a wary eye on our surroundings—just in case—and continued my reflections. What had Lev said? “Lift the seal of the Fire Fiend, then die. You’re a disposable key.”

I doubt he was talking about her chains, I thought, eyeing the excited girl ahead of me. *I didn’t sense any of the serpent’s mana in them. Meaning...*

“The real ‘seal’ is farther in,” I murmured, halting to peer ahead.

The child pouted up at me, as if to say, “Keep walking!”

“Oh, sorry about that. Here, squeeeeze!” I said, bending my knees and giving her a gentle hug, just like my mom had often done for me. Her twitching ears and wagging tail showed that she enjoyed it as much as Caren always had. On closer inspection, I could see a touch of violet in her white hair—perhaps that was its natural color.

Then, my stomach grumbled. I followed the sound with an embarrassed little “Oh,” although it was a perfectly natural occurrence. I hadn’t eaten since the inquisitors had brought me here.

The girl looked up at me, puzzled, then prodded my belly with her index finger.

“That noise means I’m hungry,” I explained. “Once we get out of here, let’s have lots of tasty things to eat.”

The girl looked alarmed, then dashed off.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, following in bewilderment.

She stopped before long...yet I could see nothing. I brought my light close to the place before us, but it revealed only a dirty stone wall.

The girl hopped up and down excitedly.

"Here? I don't see any—"

I had no sooner brushed the wall with my right hand than a thrill shot through me.

This is just how I felt fighting the black dragon or that four-winged devil—like the fear of an unbridgeable gap has my heart in its grip. And yet...

The girl felt no such thing. On the contrary, she was waving her tail in high spirits and looking as though she wanted to know why I was taking so long.

I suppose I wouldn't make a very good impression if I threw in the towel now.

Grinning at myself, I resumed touching the wall. An instant later, mana surged behind me! I spun around in surprise to find the mana lamps on the walls all alight and the fiery serpent flying at me. I leapt aside, and it crashed into the wall, which sucked it in.

"Wh-What in the world?!"

A jet-black door emerged where I was certain there had been blank stone a moment before. A torrent of vivid scarlet mana followed and began simultaneously constructing eight of the most intricate spell formulae that I'd ever seen.

C-Could this mana be...

"The same type used in Blazing Qilin's formula?!" I exclaimed. "Then...*this* must be the 'seal of the Fire Fiend'!"

I felt my heart quail. I'd had Lydia and Tina at my side in that encounter. Now, however—

Warm little fingers closed around my left hand. The fox-eared girl smiled gently at me, as if to say, "Don't worry. I'm here, remember?"

My mind settled. I had seen *her* formulae before, so I should be able to deal with them. And if I let fear get the better of me...

"I won't have any right to see Lydia's future, or the girls'!"

The spell formulae were spreading out to cover not just the door but the whole area around it. Their beauty made me green with envy, and their precision was truly unparalleled. But they were also blatantly hostile. If they unleashed their magic, I would be a dead man.

I drew in a deep breath, touched the black door to start my interference...and immediately got a nasty surprise—the sheer volume of information nearly fried my brain. I had to struggle just to keep from dropping to one knee.

Mentally, I tallied up what I'd learned:

- These formulae resembled the fiery serpent's.
- They were all encrypted, and the encryption changed with dizzying speed. Hijacking or collapsing them was impossible.
- This encryption was almost identical to the cipher used in the diary that had contained Blazing Qilin's spell formula.
- These spells contained staggering quantities of mana—more than Lydia could generate now and on par with what I imagined Tina might one day achieve at her peak. Whoever had made these was unquestionably a superhuman genius.
- If they went off, they would hit with the force of strategic siege magic!

The formulae continued growing all the while, even reaching out toward the spiral staircase we'd come down. I grimaced. Unless I disarmed them, these spells would not only level the island but leave their mark on the surrounding landscape as well!

The girl peered up at me, bemused. She must not have been able to follow what was going on.

I cracked the encryption and was just about to disarm the first spell, but it changed on me before I got the chance. "Sorry!" I said while I grappled with the rapidly shifting formulae. "With my mana, this might be a bit of a struggle!"

The girl gave me another puzzled look, then put her hands together and started to sing. Pale lights began to congregate around me and glow brighter.

"What in the world—"

I let my question trail off in shock as my mana suddenly ballooned. Had I been forcibly linked to the flickering glows?!

I felt like I could do anything. I had only experienced this overwhelming sensation once before—when I had forged a deep link with Lydia during our fight against the black dragon. And even that might not have been this intense.

I knew it. This child is a great spell. And these lights are elementals, so— No, all that can wait!

Relying on my newfound mana, I set about disarming the formulae by brute force. While I was at it, I waved my right hand and directed multiple casts of the advanced spell Imperial Light Recovery at the girl and myself. Once our wounds healed, I tried my hand at lifting the curse, but to no avail.

These marks of malediction are beyond the pale! If only I'd spent more time studying purification!

Even so, I was managing to stop the spread of the spells while I picked them apart. One, two, three, four... At last, I broke through the seventh formula. Just as I came to grips with the eighth and last, the difficulty shot through the roof. I grunted as the final formula pushed me back, even eating into the spells that I thought I'd already disarmed.

Not good!

Just then, an unfamiliar supporting spell appeared on the door, and writing came with it. The formula was elegant yet solid and drew on all eight elements.

Is this derived from botanical magic?!

I swiftly incorporated the new formula into my own, accelerating my decryption.

I could tell that the message was quite old because the first half of it had deteriorated into illegibility, and the letters used allowed me to narrow down the time period. The western branch of the wolf clan had used this dialect roughly two hundred years ago!

...The three of us crossed the dimensional corridor and arrived here, in the depths of the Etherhearts' laboratory tower. And though we lifted seven of the seals upon the black gate, we chose to retreat. For any of my family who may read this, I leave a spell to aid you, and the name that will unlock the final seal. When you get down to it, I didn't have the courage to see what lies at the end. If you found this useful, I hope you'll leave a fruit of the Great Tree on my grave. The name is...

The name and date had vanished, but I could guess. Not many beastfolk spoke the western wolf-clan dialect and craved fruit of the Great Tree.

I see. So, he came here too. Now, two centuries later, here I am with the same name. Will wonders never cease? And to cap it off...

I looked at the singing little fox girl and smiled.

"Your name is Atra too."

Her golden eyes widened. "Atra," she murmured, bashful but full of joy.

The lights around us grew to dazzling brilliance, and the mana at my disposal increased by an order of magnitude. The seal that had fought me so stubbornly melted away. Then, at last, the eighth spell formula disintegrated. I touched the bare surface of the black door and pushed with all my might.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed the fiery serpent transforming into a sorceress with long crimson hair and a pair of tiny spectacles.

Where have I seen her— That vision when I sealed Blazing Qilin!

The next moment, Atra and I were sucked into the black door. I could still hear her singing.

*

"Where on earth...?"

The next thing I knew, we were standing on an unfamiliar stone path. I looked around but saw no trace of the door or the place we'd just left. Soft light shone down on us, and I felt a pleasant breeze. Flowers that I'd never seen before bloomed beside the path, which ran through groves of hearty trees. This was no realm of subterranean darkness by any stretch of the imagination. There wasn't a person in sight.

"Some forest?" I murmured as I surveyed the scenery. "No, the trees are arranged too neatly for that, and this path is clearly man-made. A long-abandoned garden, perhaps? Tina would be able to tell me more about it."

I looked up and saw tree branches thrusting through the skeletal remains of a building, which looked as though it had once been fitted with glass. And high above...

"A flock of sea-green griffins?" To the best of my knowledge, that breed only inhabited the eastern regions of the kingdom. I puzzled over the evidence for a while. Then, I hit on an explanation. "These must be the ruins of a greenhouse, or something like it. Still, how did we get here from so deep under— Whoa there!"

Atra yanked on my left hand with both of hers. Apparently, she wanted me to follow her. I couldn't begin to guess where we were but opted to follow her lead for the time being. We set out together.

As we continued down the path, I experienced a strong sense of

déjà vu. Although this place was obviously built on a grander scale, the layout of its walkways, the way its trees and flowers had been planted, and even the location of what must once have been a rest area all bore striking similarities to Tina's greenhouse on the outskirts of the northern capital.

"Or the other way around," I mused. "Maybe this place was the inspiration."

Not even the royal capital could boast a greenhouse as large as Tina's. I had merely been impressed with its size at the time. In retrospect, however, I couldn't help wondering how even a ducal house had managed to outdo the first city of the kingdom. I doubted that Duke Walter had deliberately withheld the information. Most likely, he hadn't known himself. I would have to ask him who had designed that greenhouse when next we met.

My investigation into Tina and Stella's late mother had barely progressed, even though I'd been at it since winter. Yet I had learned her original surname—Etherheart. And I had just read that same name in the message on the door.

"Meaning Duchess Rosa might have known about this pla—Ah!"

A splash of cold water put an abrupt end to my speculation. A musical cry called my attention to Atra, who had climbed into the remains of a fountain just ahead. Water was still gushing into the ruined basin. Her mischievous look and swishing tail told me that she wanted to play.

"Hey now! Has someone been naughty?" I demanded, looking from myself to the girl. "Children who don't behave get...this!" I leapt into the former fountain and set about washing Atra in the flow of clean water.

Fondly, I reflected that Caren and I had often jumped into a canal like this on our way home from playing. But while I waxed nostalgic, Atra wriggled free of my grasp and cheerfully splashed water at me.

"Now you've done it," I threatened as the rambunctious girl turned to flee. She was just like a beastfolk child as she pushed through the water, yipping merrily.

Once I'd gotten the dirt off us, we continued on our way, munching on succulent fruits plucked from trees we passed. I was fascinated to discover that small birds and animals didn't flee at our approach. It seemed that people had become an unknown sight

here.

Atra gave my left hand a tug.

"Oh, I knew it," I said as the door to a private room much like Tina's came into view up ahead.

I walked up to the wooden door and gingerly laid my hand on it. Although devoid of barriers, it had been encased in layer upon layer of preservation magic. I slowly opened it, then froze.

"This is...incredible," I murmured, awestruck.

The room was entirely covered in bookshelves. They started near the door and continued all along the walls. Once again, it reminded me of Tina's room, but on a far grander scale. I touched one volume—*A Record of All Heaven's Knights and Heaven's Mages*. Those extinct titles had once denoted the strongest living masters of close- and long-range combat, respectively.

"No dust."

The preservation spells evidently extended to the entire room. I could hardly wait to peruse this private library. However...

I looked at Atra. Enthusiastic play had left her covered in stray leaves, meaning that the first thing I ought to look for was...

"A bath, I suppose," I muttered resignedly. "What with all the magic preserving this place, it might still be usable. So— Hey! Get back here!"

Atra scampered off farther into the room, ears and tail bristling. I took it that she was no fan of baths.

Even more like young Caren, then.

Chuckling, I embarked on a game of tag with the child.

A short while into the chase, I succeeded in discovering an open-air bath that still worked. After a wash and a soak to gather my thoughts, I began, hazily, to see the big picture.

This place was larger than most mansions, yet it had no corridors—each door opened directly into the next room. The huge library that I'd first entered, an evidently unused kitchen, the open-air hot-spring bath, a simple work area, and more were designed to form a complete dwelling in and of themselves. None of the spell formulae that held it together conformed to existing patterns. My paltry mana wouldn't be enough to activate a single one of them.

I ran my hands over the black closets that lined the walls of the room. I was wearing a new white shirt, which Atra had found for me during my explorations. Perhaps she had lived here at one time.

The closets were made of wood. But what wood could stave off decay for centuries, even with magical preservation? My mind leapt to the Great Tree towering over the eastern capital.

Atra gave me a puzzled look, wondering why I wasn't following her, and trotted up to me. Her hair was wet, and she wore a new white dress, but the bandages I'd tied around her wrists and ankles were still in place—she seemed unwilling to remove them. I pretended not to notice her approach…then scooped her up in a hug. Prisoner secured!

The little girl flailed in my arms, using her whole body to protest.

"There was nothing unfair about that," I responded. "Now, let's dry your hair, then find you a place to rest."

Atra pointed her arm at a door. I followed her directions through several rooms filled with closets and arrived at another door, larger than the rest. It flickered with encryption when Atra touched it, resisting our entry. In the end, however, the formula gave out, and the door opened.

"Well now."

We found ourselves in a bedroom with a massive canopied bed in its center. A small table and a plain chair of great antiquity stood beside it. Yet more closets lined the walls, and lights occupied the four corners. A striking crimson carpet covered the floor.

I felt a little guilty about intruding, and Atra took advantage of my discomfort to slip out of my grasp. She bounded straight onto the bed—or rather, into my levitation spell, which caught her before she landed on it. The little girl deftly spun around in midair, her bangs, ears, and tail standing bolt upright as she pouted her displeasure.

"No," I told her. "Not while your hair is wet."

I deposited her on the wooden chair and commenced blowing her hair dry with a magical warm breeze. She beamed and chirped delightedly.

This table and chair didn't come from a craftsman—an amateur made them by hand. But at the same time…

"They really must have treasured these. There are over a thousand preservation spells on them," I murmured. "There, all done."

Atra stood up and started twirling on the spot, presumably enjoying the feel of her newly washed and dried hair. Then, she

sprang at me. I caught her, and she immediately started clambering up me.

Oh no! I finally got her clean, and she already wants to play again!

With another levitation spell, I gently tossed the startled girl onto the bed. Atra bounced on it a few times with gleeful exuberance before burrowing into the blankets. She wriggled around under them for a few moments, then poked her head out to look at me. She gave the bed a few emphatic pats, commanding me to sit. Once I complied, she laid her head on my lap, so I stroked it, to her evident satisfaction. Before long, the sound of relaxed, regular breathing announced that she was asleep.

I thought I knew what Atra was. But whatever her true nature, I owed her my life. I would find a way to manage. Once again, I remembered that lesson I'd learned on my dad's knee: "You can forget the things you've done, but never forget what others do for you."

I slipped my left hand free and laid it tenderly on the child's head.

Yes, dad, I remember. After all, I am your son.

I felt a presence behind me. Slowly, I transferred Atra's head to the pillow, then stood up and turned around. The real challenge, I suspected, was yet to come.

"I've been expecting you," I said.

"Let's take this elsewhere," a young woman's icy voice responded. "We mustn't drag Atra into it."

*

The next thing I knew, I was standing back in the first room I'd entered. Dazed, I couldn't help murmuring, "She makes teleporting others look easy."

"How could a man who lets a little spell like that surprise him break the seals I put my life into?"

I turned to see the beauty, with her tiny spectacles and distinctive fiery tresses, standing beside a table. She wore a sorceress's robe in shades of scarlet, and an enchanted sword hung at her hip. I supposed she was in her late teens. Something about her reminded me of Lydia, although I couldn't quite put my finger on what. Her arms were crossed, and she was looking coldly at me —yet her translucent figure told me that this young woman was not

among the living.

"I am Allen, son of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan," I said, recalling what I'd seen when I'd sealed Blazing Qilin. "Do I have the honor of addressing a sorceress hailed as an unparalleled genius five centuries past—the great Fire Fiend?"

A dagger of flame shot past my neck at incredible speed, then stopped short of a bookcase and hung in midair. I had been totally unable to react. The slightest movement would have meant my death.

"Don't use that nickname," the woman responded. "And don't go overboard with titles either."

Countless serpentine briars of fire sprang up around me in a menacing circle. Yet none of the books or shelves caught fire. Even from beyond the grave, she controlled her spells with staggering finesse. I felt myself so comically outclassed that my curiosity got the better of my fear.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "But how did Atra come to be chained up like that with you here? It must have happened years ago, if the mana is anything to go by."

"Why should I tell a sorcerer of *your* caliber?" she demanded.

I shook my head in silence. She had no reason to tell me. However...

"Then please, lift the curse on Atra!" I pleaded. "I don't want to see her suffer."

I could hear her teeth grind as her beautiful face became a mask of rage. "If I could do that, I would have done it a long time ago!"

A gust of crimson flame blew through the room, and several fiery serpents immediately pressed closer around me. Nevertheless, I continued.

"If you can't lift it, who can? I fought the Church of the Holy Spirit and its knights several times before they threw me in that dungeon, and I recognize the mark of malediction on Atra." I displayed the mark on my own left wrist and saw her eyes narrow. "I'm certain this is the same type of curse, although hers is far more potent. With an example to work from, perhaps you could—"

"That malediction was invented to kill Etherhearts and weaken great spells for capture," she interrupted. "I couldn't have broken it when I was alive, and my dregs stand even less of a chance."

Dregs, huh?

I supposed that I had only managed to break her seal, even with Atra's help, because of the toll that time had taken on it.

"A wolf with the same name as you made it as far as the black gate two hundred years ago," the young woman continued, glaring at me. "He was a genuine key. To be honest, I expected him to open it. But he stopped after the seventh seal and left—he must have realized how dangerous this place is. And now a defective key, of all people, comes along and breaks in!"

Apparently, Shooting Star had possessed an ability like mine—albeit a far more potent version. Well, after seeing that support spell he'd left, I was in no position to argue.

"I'll leave at once if you'll only tell me how!" I pleaded earnestly while she transfixed me with her stare. "I have a heap of other questions for you: Where are we? What was that tower built for? Who imprisoned Atra? But I can't afford the time to ask them. And...I doubt you can either."

Although the young woman's mana remained immense, she had clearly been losing power since I broke the seal.

The serpents of flame vanished. "You're as sly as he was, anyway. All right, I'll tell you everything. But only"—to my shock, she suddenly lunged toward me—"if you beat me!"

Her sword flew from its scabbard in a horizontal sweep. I had only my training with Lydia to thank for my ability to dodge the slash. My body reacted faster than my mind, channeling wind magic to my feet. After ducking her blade, I immediately fell back to gain distance.

The bookcases in the path of her swing had not a scratch on them—a superhuman feat, to put it mildly!

The young woman rested her sword on her shoulder and smiled like a hungry wolf. "I guess you have *some* skill. I meant to send your head flying."

"You're too kind," I replied, feverishly weaving spells. That strike had taught me one thing—this woman was even stronger than Lydia!

Slowly, she leveled her sword at me. "You guessed right—I'll be gone before much longer. I poured almost all my mana into sealing the black gate when I died, and that was five hundred years ago. I can barely cast a spell anymore. At best, I might last another half a day."

I grimaced. *This* was her idea of "barely casting a spell"?

“Whatever your reasons, you saved Atra, so I’ll give you a little information,” the young woman continued, her expression softening for the first time. “Atra was chained up two years ago, and the azure dragon bones kept in the depths of the tower were stolen at the same time. She’s been wailing every day since. Thank you for freeing her. That said...”

I gave a start as the temperature rose precipitously and a barrier enclosed the whole room—to keep Atra from noticing us, I presumed. While shining plumes of flame filled the air, I racked my brain.

Atra had been imprisoned two years ago, most likely by either church inquisitors or the Knights of the Holy Spirit. But why had this young woman let it happen? And the last remains of an azure dragon? Dragon bones contained tremendous mana, even in death. What could they plan to do with a thing like that?

“I can’t bring myself to trust people anymore,” the sorceress continued wistfully. “I’ve been betrayed too many times in life and in death. I could put a lot more faith in the captive great elementals I tried to use as weapons. I assume you’ve already figured out that part? Atra is one of the Eight Great Elementals. I captured three of them to use in war—Blazing Qilin, Stone Serpent, and Thunder Fox. But while I was actually working with them...I changed my mind. I couldn’t bring myself to turn them into military magic, so I left two of them with people I could trust before I died. But before I could release Atra, I was killed—by whom, I can’t remember. In my last moments, I sealed the black gate, and I’ve been here alone ever since, guarding Atra and waiting for someone who will take her outside. And then...another betrayal.”

Fiery plumes whirled, congregating in the center of the room. There, a Firebird took shape. The supreme spell’s size and the mana it contained were an order of magnitude greater than any in my experience.

“So, please, win my trust. Convince me that I can leave Atra with you—that I can sleep at last.” Then, smiling through her tears, the young woman introduced herself. “I’m Linaria ‘Twin Heavens’ Etherheart, the only person in history to be both Heaven’s Knight and Heaven’s Mage. Fight like your life depends on it...because it does.”

Chapter 4

"Oh, wow! You look so gallant, Stella!"

"Super-duper dashing, Lady Stella!"

Hesitantly, I said, "Thank you, Tina, Ellie." My sisters had welcomed me into our grand council hall on the outskirts of the northern capital—and thus into our military headquarters—with cries of praise. But when I looked around, I saw the maids in breastplates who had replaced Roland as my guards covering their mouths with their hands. Mina was even muttering something under her breath. ("I can't believe Roland missed his chance to see this. He's an absolutely perfect Walker, but when it comes to being a butler, he's as luckless as he is witless.")

Does it not suit me?

It was my first time wearing this white-and-azure military uniform. Our head maid, Shelley, had tailored it from one left by my late mother, Rosa Howard. And she had done so at her own discretion—my father still hadn't given me permission to put on a uniform or take to the battlefield. "I will fight this war with you!" I had declared in a magical message. Not a word had arrived from him since. He must have been furious about all this, including the fact that I'd gone to the marquesses for help. Nevertheless, my mind was made up—I wouldn't waver.

I approached my sisters' desks, and they stood up to stare intently at me.

"I...I wish you wouldn't," I said. "It's a bit embarrassing."

"Stella, you look *amazing* in that outfit!" Tina declared, eyes shining. She was hopping up and down on the spot. "Doesn't she, Ellie?!"

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie agreed, although she looked a little nervous. "B-But are you really going to war, Lady Stella?"

I nodded firmly. "I am. I think that appearing on the battlefield to raise morale is the best thing I can do right now."

I lacked Tina's in-depth knowledge of Galois's weather and terrain and Ellie's ability to rapidly process documents. Even so, my

name was Stella Howard. Our officers and men couldn't be happy knowing that their future duchess was taking her ease far from the front. And I would make an excellent decoy, although Tina and Ellie didn't need to know that part.

Shelley paused in her work and looked at me. "Lady Stella," she said, with tears in her eyes, "you're the perfect likeness of Duchess Rosa."

"Shelley..." I murmured, drying the head maid's eyes with a white handkerchief. She had been blazing through mountains of paperwork and managing our supply lines perfectly since the start of this campaign.

If I look anything like my mother, then I'm glad I wore this uniform.

Tina's right hand shot into the air, and her forelock with it. "Stella!" she cried. "I'll go with—"

"No," I replied, not even giving her the chance to finish. Her lips went on flapping wordlessly.

Meanwhile, Ellie clutched my left sleeve and looked up at me. "L-Lady Stella, I'd l-like to wo gith you too. Oh..."

"Ellie," I said, "what would Shelley do without you and Tina?"

"Oh, b-but...but—"

"Miss Walker, I give your request—and that adorable look on your face, like a little animal—full marks!" our maid corps's second-in-command interjected, approaching with her subordinates. "But please, just this once, leave Lady Stella in our hands!"

"Mina," Ellie murmured, greeting her cousin.

"Lady Tina, Miss Walker," the senior maid continued, bending her knees slightly and smiling at my little sisters, "I couldn't rate your concern for Lady Stella higher. You've grown into such kind young ladies that I...I... Oh!" Mina threw her arms around the girls, evidently too overcome to let this opportunity pass her by.

They responded to her caresses with startled cries of "M-Mina?!" and "Oh, I can't break free!"

"Shelley, would you give me the latest news?" I asked the head maid.

To my surprise, a deep somber voice replied, "If it's news you want, I think I can oblige you," and an imposing man in a dirty uniform entered the hall. His hair was platinum with a tinge of azure, and, except for the fact that he was clean-shaven, his face looked very like my father's.

"Uncle Euni!" I exclaimed.

Everyone rose and saluted Under-duke Euni Howard. In addition to governing Galois, he was my father's younger brother, which made him an uncle to Tina and me.

"Stella, Tina, it's been too long," he said, breaking into a broad grin and raising a burly arm. "At ease, everyone. We couldn't fight on the front lines if not for your valiant struggles here. Look forward to the end of this war—I promise you'll be rewarded! Out of my brother's purse, of course."

Laughter filled the hall. I could see why my father placed such complete trust in my uncle. In his words, "No one but Euni could manage Galois."

"I assume you know the general situation," he said, grinning as he surveyed a map of the whole northern region. Imperial forces already occupied two thirds of Galois. "We're on the defensive, and the enemy is advancing after detaching their vanguard from their main force. They outnumber us. We stand no chance in a traditional pitched battle."

"Or at least, that's what we want the imperials to think," I amended, meeting my uncle's gaze. "That's how we've drawn them so deep into our territory. Graham and our other spies have even spread rumors that our house is at its wit's end and desperate to avoid a decisive battle." I pointed to southern Galois. "Our armies are currently massing at Rostlay and building field fortifications there. My father hasn't wavered from his purpose—he means to wipe out the core of the empire's southern army in one fell swoop. Do I have that right?"

"Yes, you do. Tell me, Stella: What would your next move be?"

I leaned over the map, taking in a bird's-eye view. The enemy vanguard was obviously farther ahead of their main force than it had been a few days earlier.

Of course!

I put my finger on the Howard forces...and slid them around behind the imperial vanguard.

"Splendid!" my uncle exclaimed. "Stella, if you don't have your heart set on anyone, what would you say to marrying my son? He's easy on the eyes!"

"What? W-Well, I, um..." I faltered, unable to evade this unlooked-for shot. My cousin was still a babe in arms.

My uncle smirked. "So, you *have* found yourself a sweetheart. Oh, but I was forgetting! Who could it be if not that—"

“U-Uncle! N-Now is hardly the time! And besides, Mr. Allen is...” My head drooped as my words trailed off. Tina and Ellie were biting their lips.

“Forgive me,” my uncle said, placing his big hand on each of our shoulders in turn. “I didn’t mean to distress you. Walter, Graham, and the professor have told me about young Allen. But I have something I hope will raise your spirits. Listen.”

All eyes turned to Under-duke Euni Howard as, with a fearless grin, he announced, “One of the professor’s magical birds just arrived bearing an urgent message: ‘Howard forces ambush, rout enemy vanguard on Meer Plain. Friendly losses minimal. Public announcement strictly forbidden—deception necessary to draw enemy into position.’”

*

The Meer Plain was located in central Galois. And from atop the “Napping Cat,” as the hill on its southeastern side was known, the battle still looked one-sided. After launching an ambush from three southern positions at dawn, my army of fifteen thousand was routing fifty thousand imperial troops.

“Goodness, how they panic,” the professor remarked. “Perhaps they let the first decent provisions they found in Galois go to their head? I swear, Your Highness has the wickedest mind in the kingdom.” My good friend, who had long been feared as our kingdom’s most viciously devious sorcerer, spoke just as he usually did. He had already set up a round table and chairs beside me and begun sipping tea.

“Unless my memory deceives me, the suggestion to bait our trap with Meer’s food stores came from a certain university professor who lives in fear of the punishment his students will mete out to him once the war is over,” I countered, surveying the battle below. The time was almost ripe.

“Don’t remind me of my dreadful fate, Walter. The word ‘restraint’ vanishes from my students’ dictionaries when Allen is involved. Oh, I’d say it’s about time.”

I snorted and raised my left hand. Immediately, the soldiers ready and waiting behind us launched a number of azure flares—and with equal quickness, a force all in blue charged out of the woods ahead of the fleeing imperials. This was the mightiest force

the kingdom's northern houses could muster—the Azure Order, under the command of the valiant Earl Ozias Fischer—and their sudden arrival came as another blow to our disordered enemies' morale.

"Have you left an opening on one side of the encirclement?" asked the professor.

"Of course. We wouldn't gain anything from a slaughter, and we aren't looking to spark the next great war."

"What mastery!" my friend mocked, raising his teacup—white porcelain with a design of a black cat. "We may have them on the run, but they have the numbers to deal us a heavy blow if they get desperate. The whole plan was always mad, of course. I mean, using sheer mobility to annihilate an enemy who outnumbers us more than two to one? I wondered what you'd do when rain turned the roads to mud, but the way your magic froze them into a snowfield fairly took my breath away! I'd never even considered attaching wooden planks to your soldiers' boots to gain speed. No wonder you're the only hereditary 'god of war' on the continent."

"A child could do as much with the right information. Placing Roland back under Graham's command was the right move—we've had more and better intelligence since," I said, sinking into a chair across from the professor. "Still, I've pushed the troops hard. They would have gone without hot meals, if not for the portable rations Tina invented. Professor, pour me a cup of that tea."

"Allow me, sir," interjected my head butler, Graham Walker, as he seized the teapot. I hadn't noticed his arrival.

"True. You moved your forces here from Rostlay, positioned them for a partial envelopment, and struck, all in just one day," the professor mused, smirking. "Most armies would have taken at least five days to do as much. And most commanders couldn't have arranged such simple, well-chosen maneuvers. Walter, overmodesty is a bad habit of yours. Won't you help me correct it, Graham?"

"I've seldom known my master to take advice from anyone but his wife and daugh— Your tea, sir."

I growled, "You're on thin ice." Then, while draining my cup, I looked up at the griffins circling the battlefield. "We mainly use them for scouts and messengers, but Liam proposed offensive applications. I'll have to ask him for details once this war is over. Professor, do you think the enemy will retreat?"

"No, they won't. Or rather, they can't. After all..." A sadistic

grin spread over my friend's face. Graham wore a cold smile as well.

I haven't seen those looks on their faces in a long while.

"By this time, every newspaper in the empire will be trumpeting a great victory over the kingdom," the professor continued, sneering for all the world like a villain toying with his trapped adversaries. "Galois has no railroads, except in the far south, and the empire hasn't invested in networks of rails, telephone lines, or magical communication. Information travels far more slowly there than it does in our country."

"I've already employed multiple channels to disseminate false reports within the empire, exaggerating our losses and downplaying theirs," Graham added. "Roland has a surprisingly deft hand with these matters."

How would the empire's people, noble and commoner alike, react to those reports of "victory"? Doubtless, they would demand a decisive battle from their southern forces. The army could never admit that it hadn't fought a real battle or won any victory worth mentioning—that ship had sailed. After all, their commander was the imperial crown prince. It didn't matter that, in reality, they were buckling under their inability to forage because they had invaded before the autumn harvest.

"And although they suffered a rout today, they'll count few casualties once they regroup," the professor said, with the look of a swindler. "I suppose the next rumors to make the rounds of the imperial camp might go something like 'The enemy had us surrounded but let the chance slip through their fingers and racked up heavy losses into the bargain.'"

"A touch too fanciful, perhaps," Graham objected. "Might I suggest something more along these lines: 'The Howards won the day, but it cost them dearly—enough to shake their confidence in the war. The royal capital is in rebel hands, and the northern lords —including Marquesses Ector and Brauner—refuse to act. The duke daily laments his rash words at the bargaining table.' The enemy commander seems to have availed himself of a tactician from outside the imperial ranks—an enigmatic individual, though rumor makes them a shrewd Lalannoyan—so a touch of realism wouldn't go amiss. Reports also place Imperial Princess Yana Yustin and Master Huss Saxe in the enemy's main camp. Both are reputedly brilliant despite their tender years."

“Wonderful! And to cap it off, Walter, won’t you do some wailing for us? ‘Oh, I’m about to lose both my darling daughters to the same man’ would be a start.”

After a tense silence, I said, “Professor, if you take your jokes too far, I may play some of my own.”

“Oh? S-Such as?” my friend asked, quailing.

You fool! Don’t you realize I’m not your only enemy here?! Look at Graham’s eyes! They say, “Aren’t you forgetting about Ellie?”

Gravely, I said, “I might pressure the Leinsters to resume finding you a bride.”

The professor laughed loudly. “Walter, think of our long friendship. Graham, I swear I didn’t mean anything by leaving Ellie out.” His voice rose into a shriek. “So please, anything but marriage talk!”

I had won, and easily. But what a hollow victory.

The battle on the plain below was wrapping up as well. I drank the last of my tea while my troops steadily drove the imperials into the river.

“The Leinsters must be on the warpath in the south,” I said, “but what will the Lebuferas do? And what I hear of His Majesty’s wounds worries me.”

“I’m rather uneasy about that myself,” the professor replied. “But the west won’t act. At best, they may send some troops east, drawing on the Order of Royal Knights’ strategic reserves. At least, under ordinary circumstances.”

I turned to look at him. “What are you getting at?”

“I have nothing definite to go on except that Anko stubbornly refuses to return from the western capital—although it does send messenger kittens. That said, I’m certain this debacle will be serious. Allen is up to his eyeballs in it, and fate never throws trifles that boy’s way.”

“If the war ends well, his elevation will be nonnegotiable.”

“The question is how high. But remember, Walter…there will be a free-for-all to follow. What will you do when Stella and Tina both ask you for a betrothal at once?”

A long pause followed. Then, I snapped, “I won’t deal in hypotheticals! If you rake this up again—”

“Fresh news, sir,” Graham interrupted with perfect timing. “Lady Stella has set out for Rostlay with Under-duke Euni—in military uniform. Mina is acting as her bodyguard. Her ladyship

also sends you a personal message: 'According to Tina's forecast, it won't rain in the next week, but we can expect fog.' I have nothing more to report."

Humph. So, Stella—Stella!—saw through my plan. Be that as it may, she ought to be ashamed of flouting her father's orders so brazenly! First it was the Royal Academy, then the uniform, then seeking aid from Ector and Brauner, and...

Her tutor is at the bottom of this. I must sit down to drink with that young man, once we've rescued him.

"We can see you grinning, Walter," the professor gibed.

"Sir," Graham added, "while I could not be more delighted with Lady Stella's growth—"

"Enough!" I barked. "Graham, relay this message to Shelley and all the northern lords: 'no change in battlefield or tactics.'"

"Certainly. But if I may, sir, one other point troubles me."

"Yes?" I asked warily.

"I'm even less certain of this than I am of the imperial tactician, but..." Graham faltered. What news could make "the Abyss" hesitate to speak?

I waited in silence.

At last, softly, he said, "The Hero, Grand Duchess Alice Alvern, has not been seen in the imperial capital."

"I see," I said slowly.

That living legend could be anywhere. I doubt she would intervene in a war between humans...but I'll keep her in mind.

Graham bowed so deeply that his waist formed a right angle. "I shall depart to spread rumors in northern Galois. I pray that the fortunes of war favor you, sir." With that, the head butler vanished.

The professor rose, returning the table and chairs to the darkness for safekeeping. "Well then, Walter," he said, "I'm off to the imperial capital. I must have a few words with the old emperor, who I'm sure has no more desire for a protracted war than we do."

"It's in your hands," I replied gruffly. Wars were easy to start and difficult to end. I was fortunate that the professor had been in the north when this one broke out—not that I would ever admit it!

"Walter, I believe you once told Allen that, as a military family, the Howard line would end with you," my friend continued, smiling at me. "It seems you were mistaken. Do you suppose Stella will take up your mantle? Personally, I'd rather not be caught up in a tussle between a 'goddess of war' and the Lady of the Sword."

“That again?! I can’t see the future!” I snapped. Then, in a calmer tone, I added, “As we planned, our war with the empire will end on the same field as a hundred years ago—Rostlay. We’ll defeat them there—that goes without saying. The question is how.”

*

A reasonably large hill occupied the center of the Rostlay area in southern Galois. The locals called it “The Indomitable” after an old legend. A renowned warrior had once held it alone against a horde of monsters, or so the story went. I felt sure that Mr. Allen would have told me more, with a laughing “You’re so eager to learn, Stella.”

I touched the sea-green griffin feather secreted in my inner breast pocket, then the hair clip and ribbon that Tina and Ellie had insisted on pinning to my left shoulder.

In any event, the hill was a key strategic position. And yet...

“Is that report true?” I asked Mina, not for the first time. “Has my father really abandoned the high ground?”

“Yes, my lady, I’m certain of it. The imperial army has occupied the hill and built its main camp there.”

Our forces had taken up their positions at Rostlay before the imperials. So, naturally, The Indomitable had been ours for the taking. Nevertheless... I cast my eye over the map on the table. We had deliberately chosen to establish our headquarters farther back from the center of the field and to array our troops only a short distance away.

I recalled something that Mr. Allen had written in my notebook: “Nothing happens without a reason. Even if you can’t see a connection at first, one might still exist somewhere. That’s why looking at the big picture is so important—not that you need me to tell you so.”

I closed my eyes and said, “Mina, what about our troop movements?”

“Transport is complete!” the maid replied cheerfully. “All northern troops are here and in position. I’m told some units arrived by car, but none fell by the wayside. Lady Tina deserves full marks!”

After the imperial army had commenced its march from Ohwin, the old capital, trains had begun ferrying the combined forces of the

northern houses from the outskirts of the northern capital to Seesehr, on the southern edge of Galois. Once there, our troops had immediately set out for Rostlay under cover of fog. A fleet of cars had transported units that couldn't cover the distance swiftly enough otherwise. This experiment had probably been the first ever use of automobiles in war, and its success might have earned Tina a place in the annals of military history.

"Logistically speaking," I said, "the imperial army can send at most one hundred thousand troops into southern Galois, while we have seventy thousand. Although they outnumber us, I expect the enemy to mass their forces and attempt to breach our lines here." I pointed on the map to our right wing, which had been only five thousand strong the day before. "They won't notice our reinforcements in all this fog. And they won't find it easy to overrun our entrenched position."

The big picture was coming into focus. I saw my father's plan.

Rising from my chair, I smiled at Mina and said, "I'm going to the foot of the hill. Tell my father that I intend to cast my new supreme spell."

The battle was joined before I reached my destination. As I'd predicted, the imperials launched a major assault on our right wing. But although the fog had lifted there, the charge stalled against Uncle Euni's meticulous field fortifications, manned by reinforcements from the two marquesses. The imperials got impatient. And then...the time was ripe.

Communication orbs throughout our forces hummed with a report from a scouting griffin high above: "Enemy reinforcements imminent! Major force descending hill, bound for our right wing! No movement from imperial headquarters!"

My father, Duke Walter Howard, had been waiting for this news. He dismounted his horse and came to stand beside me. Then he folded his arms and gazed at the hill, still shrouded in fog. Behind us, the Azure Order and other elite troops chosen from throughout the north were waiting impatiently for the order to charge.

"Stella," my father said, "you've already done more than enough to raise morale. There's no need for you to cast Frost-Gleam Hawks! Remember, that spell Allen crafted for you is still top secret."

“The more we can shock the enemy, the better. I won’t hesitate to use the strength that Mr. Allen gave me,” I retorted. “Foreign powers will find out about it sooner or later anyway, and this is a crisis. Can’t other concerns wait until *after* we’ve won?”

In the tense silence that followed, I could hear the music of the battlefield through the fog to our south.

At last, my father let out a long breath. “You certainly are a handful.”

“My tutor’s been a bad influence,” I replied.

“I must have words with him. Now, follow my lead!” My father pressed his fists together and began weaving a spell. The immense mana he radiated was coating the ground in snow and freezing nearby trees solid.

So this…this is the full might of a Howard duke! The old me would probably have lost heart as soon as she saw it. But now…

“Right behind you!” I roared, unsheathing my wand and rapier and pointing them toward the hill.

Mr. Allen was there for me when I dueled Caren. Now, I’m on my own. Even so…Even so, I can’t stand still forever!

Countless snowflakes whirled around me, blown by a gust of purifying light, as I activated the supreme spell that Mr. Allen had gifted to me—Frost-Gleam Hawks! Two birds of prey, an inseparable pairing of ice and light, wheeled protectively above me.

“Full marks…doesn’t begin to cover it,” Mina murmured, stunned. Her fellow maids joined in with an awed “Beautiful” and an astonished “Oh, wow! Just wow!” Behind them, the troops murmured, equally taken aback.

I had practiced thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of times, and this was my most stable cast yet. Could my good-luck charms from Tina, Ellie, and Mr. Allen have played a hand in that? Tender feelings, unsuited to the battlefield, swelled in my breast as I shouted, “Father!”

“I know!” came his answering cry. Amid a raging snowstorm, the supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf took shape!

“I’m ready any time!” I called, meeting my father’s gaze.

“You’re to wait here—I won’t have you haring off into the thick of things,” he said. “Stella.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve come far, and I’m proud of you! Now, fire!”

“Yes, sir!” I responded, startled. Then, louder, “Yes, sir!” While

my heart swelled with the unexpected praise, I swung my wand and rapier, loosing my hawks into the fog that covered the hill! At the same moment, Blizzard Wolf howled and began its charge.

Our supreme spells blasted away the fog in a flash.

My father leapt back astride his horse and barked, “All units, advance! Dislodge the imperials!”

A mighty war cry answered, and the Azure Order started up the hill with a living war god at their head. Sunlight, shards of ice, and vestiges of mana made the ascending soldiers shine. Even from where I stood, I could hear our whole army cheering, and I could feel its soaring morale in my bones.

“Advance!” I yelled into my communication orb. “It’s now or never!”

Answering battle cries rang out across the whole of Rostlay. Then, in no time at all, the imperial battle standards toppled. We had retaken the hill.

“Now entering enemy camp!” came the report from my communication orb.

Victory was ours.

My father had begun by allowing our foes to claim the hill and enticing them with our sparse right wing. Once reinforced, however, our wing had held firm, so the imperials had committed their reserves to the charge. Our forces had taken advantage of that opportunity to break through the center of the enemy line. That left our enemies bunched up against our right wing with no hope of retreat. We had only to surround and annihilate them. And yet...

I silently cast an ice spell around me. “It’s not over yet,” I told our maids’ teary-eyed second-in-command. “Watch our perimeter for— Mina!”

“Lady Stella!” Mina cried. We had noticed at almost the same moment.

A hail of stone projectiles and rays of light burst from a supposedly deserted stretch of woodland...only to bounce off the ice mirrors I had just conjured or disintegrate on contact with Mina’s punches and kicks. The other maids fell into a defensive formation around me while their second-in-command faced forward, sinking into a combat stance.

Mina let out a sharp cry and thrust her right fist forward. To my consternation, her punch produced a tornado. The spell that had been blocking our perceptions collapsed with a deafening crash, revealing a dozen or so enemy soldiers clustered around a strange

box—perhaps a magical device of some kind?

"H-How did that work?!" demanded the astonished, bow-wielding female knight at the head of the force.

"I knew this was a bad idea, Your Highness," a young male knight chimed in nervously. "We ought to withdraw."

"I am Duke Howard's eldest daughter, Stella Howard," I announced, cautiously weaving more spells. "I *thought* someone would try skirting around the battlefield to attack our headquarters directly. But if that was your plan, you're in the wrong place."

"A Howard?" The girl's eyes widened. "I'm Yana Yustin. And this is Huss Saxe."

Yustin and Saxe, is it?

I raised my wand and rapier. "The battle here is over. If you withdraw— Run! I'll hold them off!"

"What are you—"

"Your Highness!" Huss cried, tackling the nonplussed Yana to the ground. A moment later, magical chains passed right over their heads.

I cast the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances. My cluster of icy spears sped past Yana's unit, toward the concealed foe lurking behind it...only to shatter harmlessly against dark-gray shields.

Prince Gerard used that spell.

"I'm impressed you spotted me," a high-pitched voice said as the perception-blocking spell tore away. From behind it emerged a woman wearing a hooded, pure-white robe hemmed in crimson. She might have been no taller than Tina. Her hand clutched a small glass vial of...

"Blood and... What is that?" I murmured. But the woman ignored my question.

"Good grief," she grumbled, shaking her head. "Why must puppets choose to think for themselves at the very last moment? I warned him against a decisive battle, but I suppose the fool grew addicted to tidings of victory. Of course, Howard was a barbarian in his own right—what sort of duke leads the charge in person? But I got my Yustin blood. That only leaves..."

With a careless wave of her left hand and a baleful flash, the woman sent a shower of keen-edged blades hurtling toward the female knight.

"Your Highness!" Huss cried again, throwing himself in front of Yana.

I swung my wand and shielded them both with a compound cast of Divine Ice Mirrors, shouting, “Run, quickly! It’s probably...too late to save the crown prince! Yana Yustin! You’re her next target!”

“B-But—”

“Thank you, Lady Howard. We are in your debt! Retreat!” Huss commanded, scooping the hesitant Yana up in his arms.

“Huh? What? W-Wait! Huss!” she protested as the young knight fled with her.

“Fools,” the woman scoffed, with a burst of scornful laughter. “You aren’t going anywhere. I still crave more Yustin blood.” Then, she produced several talismans from her sleeve and flung them into empty air. Summoning circles formed all around us in rapid succession.

“Wh-What are those?” I stammered as a group of strange, heavily armored knights appeared. Their helmets hid their faces, and their hands clutched an assortment of weapons.

“Lady Stella!” Mina cried urgently. “I believe those are spell-soldiers! You must flee! We’ll buy you time!”

“Spell-soldiers? The man-made troops that Lalannoy and the empire are supposed to have engineered?” I racked my brain for more information while I took stock of my surroundings. The mystery woman was ahead of me, and spell-soldiers surrounded our group. The imperial princess and her unit, it seemed, had failed to escape.

What about my communication orb?

“Ste...! Crown prin...ly wound... Run...”

No use—it was being jammed. Still, my father wouldn’t take long to notice the disturbance.

Once again, I raised my wand and rapier. “Mina, I’ll keep this woman busy,” I said. “You take command of the others. We must hold out until help arrives! Huss Saxe! I request your cooperation!”

“Lady Stella!” Mina cried, then paused to collect herself. “Understood, my lady. You may depend upon Mina Walker.”

“We’re with you!” Huss called.

I caught another “W-Wait!” from Yana while I launched the intermediate spell Divine Ice Spears at the woman from all sides.

“Well now,” she murmured appreciatively as, to my dismay, all my javelins shattered against the dark-gray barrier that sheltered her.

In that case...!

I immediately unleashed my next spells, which I'd kept in reserve—Swift Ice Lances, Twin Icicle Pillars, and Imperial Ice Blizzard. All three advanced spells activated simultaneously, surrounding the woman. Yet, once again, they disintegrated into countless scattered shards of ice, unable to penetrate the leaden barrier.

"Not bad. That would have killed most apostles. Now, are you done trying to resist?" the woman asked, fiddling with a wooden insignia she'd taken from inside her robe.

This isn't working. No ordinary spell can put a dent in that barrier. I doubt even Frost-Gleam Hawks could pierce it. That leaves only one option. But...can I make it work without Mr. Allen?

His kind words in my notebook flashed through my mind: "You can do it, Stella. I believe in you."

Mr. Allen, give me courage! Tina, Ellie, lend me strength!

I touched the griffin plume, the hair clip, and the ribbon. Then I drew in my breath and looked at the woman.

"I...won't let you defeat me!" I shouted, conjuring Frost-Gleam Hawks with a swing of my wand and rapier.

"I don't recognize this supreme spell," the woman commented disdainfully. "But I can tell it's too weak to get past this sacred shield Her Holiness the Saint bestowed on me!"

"I don't doubt it. However..."

The paired birds of prey dove into me! Amid a whirl of snowflakes, my wand and rapier began to shine with the most vivid azure light.

Softly, I said, "Don't you know? 'Always save the best for last.'"

Despite her hood, I could sense the shock on the woman's face. Wielders of secret arts were few and far between, even within the ducal houses.

I thrust out the wand in my left hand—along with the eight-petaled Azure Shield for which it served as a focus—and commenced my charge! My shield morphed into an octagonal pyramid, boring through the woman's sinister, steely defenses. Then, bellowing at the top of my lungs, I brought my Azure Sword down on her with all my might.

I heard a harsh, metallic clang and felt a tremendous jolt. The woman had drawn a single-edged dagger and stopped my blow. Our clash offered me a clear glimpse at the emblem she'd been toying

with; it belonged to the Church of the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly, the woman's mana swelled, and I found myself flung back onto ground that had been partially reduced to a snowfield. I quickly sprang to my feet, weapons at the ready. From what I could see, blocking my Azure Sword had not only shredded one sleeve of the woman's robe but also frozen the jet-black blade of her dagger and part of her left arm.

Her muffled laughter filled the air.

"What do you find so amusing?" I demanded.

Slowly, the woman raised her face to look at me. Her dagger snapped, and its point lodged in the ground.

A shiver ran down my spine. Her eyes...terrified me.

The woman's lips curled in a mirthless grin. "I was only interested in the blood of legends," she said. "But now that I think of it, your kingdom's ducal houses have Wainwright blood in their veins. Allow me to introduce myself in lieu of gratitude. I am Edith, a new apostle chosen by Her Holiness the Saint."

"What does that mean?" I asked slowly.

"You broke my dagger and tore my robe—both gifts from Her Holiness. You'll atone for those crimes with your blood," Edith continued. Producing the small vial I'd seen earlier from her undamaged right sleeve, she transfixed me with a look of absolute confidence in her own superiority. "Thank you for opening my eyes to a new potential weapon. Now, try to resist this."

Edith smashed the vial against the ground, and a sinister spell formula blanketed the whole area.

Is she...summoning a magical creature?!

An incredible quantity of mana was converging on a pulsing dark-gray light.

No. I can't let her call this thing!

I cast Frost-Gleam Hawks and launched the spell at Edith with all the force I could muster. Even in the moment before it struck, her smile never faltered. Afterward, a blizzard sprang up, blotting out my view and freezing the nearby flora under a vast sheet of ice.

Did it work?

If not for my training with Mr. Allen, I would never have been able to evade the bony tail that thrust itself at me out of the ice fog. "Don't just rely on your eyes," he had said. "Train yourself to sense mana as well." Leaping backward, I saw a massive hole where I had just been standing.

A blast of wind cleared the ice fog...and revealed *it*.

"I-It can't be," I said, my voice quavering. The sheer enormity of the situation froze me in place. "Th-That...That's..."

A massive skeletal dragon soared through the sky above me. Countless razor-sharp teeth, each the size of a small child, lined its jaws. Membranes of leaden mana filled the gaps in its eight vast, bony wings. And worst of all, its magical defenses were so unbelievably powerful that I could see them with my naked eyes.

Th-This...This can't...

"Oh? What's the matter, Howard girl?" Edith called mockingly from her perch atop the dragon's head. "Don't tell me you're afraid. Pardon me; restraint was never my strong suit. Oh, but I know just what to say at times like this: 'always save the best for last.'" With that contemptuous remark, she burst into peals of derisive laughter.

I can't die here! I rebuked myself, tightening my trembling hands around my wand and rapier. *I'm going to rescue Mr. Allen!*

The scattering snowflakes pulsed with light as if to cheer me on.

"What's that look for? How dull," Edith said. "I was going to take you alive, but I've changed my mind. Die!"

The skeletal dragon opened its maw wide. Mana was concentrating into a dark-gray sphere between its jaws.

Dragon breath! I need to retreat to— No, Mina and the others are behind me, fighting the spell-soldiers. Dodging will put them in harm's way. My only choice is to block it!

I thrust out my wand and poured all my strength into the Azure Shield. The snowflakes flashed even brighter.

"Why don't you run?" Edith demanded, biting her nails in vexation. "Are you trying to shield that lot behind you? You, the daughter of a duke? I don't believe it! You're all rotten! You must be!"

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, glaring up at Edith. "After all, I learned from the strongest, kindest magician there is!"

After a long silence, Edith said only, "Die."

The skeletal dragon released its leaden breath.

I grunted as the blast struck my Azure Shield, tearing through it at a rapid pace. My left arm creaked under the excruciating effort of holding out my wand.

"Die!" Edith shouted again. "Quickly! Hurry up and die! Die, you vile aristocrat!"

"I will never lose...to the likes of you!" I roared, bringing up my

right hand, with the rapier I'd held in reserve, and activating a second Azure Shield. This was my true "best," which Mr. Allen had hinted at in my notebook—a double secret art.

Snowflakes danced, blazing with pale-azure light that began to freeze the dragon breath itself. My Azure Shield offered protection, but that didn't mean it couldn't attack. Like the Azure Sword, it combined offense and defense into one!

"Impossible!" Edith cried. But despite her disbelief, I finally managed to freeze even the dragon's barrier and then break through it!

Just as my magic started encroaching on its main body, however, another cloud of ice fog obliterated my vision. I still went on pouring my mana into the attack until I reached my limit and disengaged my Azure Shields. Panting with exhaustion and racked with pain, I fell to my hands and knees.

Mr. Allen saved me again, I thought, thrusting my rapier into the ground for support as I staggered to my feet. *How are Mina and—*

Suddenly, I leapt backward, blocking a tail swipe with my rapier. It was a minor miracle that I pulled it off. Still, I screamed while I went flying and tumbled onto the ground.

As the ice fog cleared, I caught glimpses of the skeletal dragon blinking with dark-gray light as it regenerated in the sky above. And on its head was Edith, clearly furious.

"How dare you?!" she raged. "Her Holiness bestowed these azure dragon bones on me! Don't think you can damage them and get away with it! I'll! Make! You! Paaay!"

The dragon's jaws gaped, drawing in mana the color of charcoal.

"Lady Stella!" Mina shrieked while fending off multiple spell-soldiers at once. "Run!"

They're all still fighting. Which means...

Edith gave a start. "Aren't you ready to lie down and die yet? Fighting won't save you!"

"I can't die!" I yelled. "I'm going to rescue Mr. Allen!"

"You're going to die right here."

The dragon was just about to unleash its breath when...

"Mm. Glad I came," a calm voice said. "Can't overlook this thing. Hup."

To Edith's consternation and mine, a figure bounded out of the nearby trees and planted a slap on the dragon's face with its little

hand. The skeletal creature plummeted to earth, its bones shattered. Its fall sent up a plume of dust and a rumble like thunder.

Edith landed too, clicking her tongue. Her lips were trembling.

Then, the girl appeared.

*

"Tragic," my savior told the shaken Edith. She was a doll-like young beauty with a gold ribbon in her platinum-blonde hair and an ancient sword slung at her hip—the Hero, Alice Alvern. "Dragons are this world's most beautiful creatures. But what is this? Azure dragon bones from long, long ago forced to move by sham great spells—not even imitations—and thin, impure blood of the Archer's line. It's hideous. Your mistress thought this up and then made it?" Alice's glare bored into the self-professed new apostle. "She must be a bad girl, and awfully twisted. Definitely a threat to the world. Kindly tell me her name. But...I don't want to use my sword. It will get dirty, and this doesn't seem worth it."

"How dare you?!" Edith screamed, stung into a rage. "How dare you, how dare you, *how dare you*?!" She trembled all over and stamped the ground. "Don't you dare insult Her Holiness—the Saint laboring to save this good-for-nothing world! Her works are righteous! Every last one of them! As she foretold, we've captured the defective key in the east, the Lady of the Sword has nearly fallen in the south, and you've appeared here in the north! As a new apostle—one of the elect—I'll strike you down today and leave us one less thing to worry about! Holy dragon, crush her!"

The skeletal dragon got back on its feet and charged the girl.

"Watch out!" I shouted, frantic to intercept—but Alice motioned me to stop.

"Mm-mm. Thanks, Saint Wolf, but I'll be fine," she said, totally unfazed by the grotesque dragon barreling toward her. As its maw gaped open, razor-sharp fangs poised to impale her, she added, "I'm just a teeny bit stronger than I look."

Both Edith and I started as she planted one dainty hand on the bony snout, stopping the colossus in its tracks. Then, with a little "Hup," she effortlessly heaved the dragon skyward.

Edith let out a strangled cry. I was speechless.

The skeleton spread its wings and righted itself high above us, then shook the air with a silent snarl of hatred. At least a dozen

magic circles appeared before it and began drawing in torrents of mana. I had never seen an offensive spell like this before! Even so, I gritted my teeth and staggered to my feet, my wand and rapier at the ready.

Its spell will hit the others…unless I stop it with another Azure Shield! I need to keep everyone safe until my father arrives!

Just as I was grimly steeling myself, however, Alice glanced at me. "Ragged, nearly out of mana, and still fighting to protect people," she said. "Well done, Saint Wolf; you really are his student. But like I said, you don't have to worry. Because—"

"Now! Kill her!" Edith shrieked at her skeletal dragon. The monstrosity, loyal to its summoner, prepared to unleash its spell.

"I am the Hero, Alice Alvern—the blade that defends this world," the girl murmured as she drew her timeworn black sword and delivered a single offhand slash.

The next thing I knew, the skeletal dragon was in two pieces and the clouds behind it were gone. The very sky had split asunder. Then the mana for the dragon's breath misfired, buffeting the whole area with a tremendous shock wave and a gust of wind.

"She *cut* that absurd barrier?" I whispered, disbelieving.

Edith looked on, too shocked for words, as the bony remains of her creature fell, turning to dust and then vanishing completely before they hit the ground.

"That's it?" Alice asked, turning back to the apostle. She sounded bored. "If you have more, send them out. I don't want to waste time."

That snapped Edith out of her shock. "I'm a new apostle, chosen by the Saint herself! And I'll make you regret taking me lightly!" she roared, producing two vials from her right sleeve and smashing both on the ground together. A stain spread from the broken vessels, then raced over the earth, swiftly forming an intricate spell formula in crimson, gray, and black.

"What in the world—?!" I exclaimed, looking around in wide-eyed astonishment.

"The shades of the imperials who died here a hundred years ago will finish you off for me," Edith crowed as, under her hood, serpentine designs appeared on her cheeks. "You have only yourselves to blame for making your stand on an old battlefield!"

I felt an ominous pulse of mana. The ground rumbled—a host of *something* was trying to claw free. Then a forest of skeletal arms

burst abruptly from the soil. I could barely suppress a scream as I braced myself for more combat.

C-Could this spell be...

All around me, skeletal soldiers continued to rise. The uniforms some still wore marked them as the war dead of Rostlay.

Edith filled the air with peals of shrill laughter. “Behold the Reverie of Restless Revenants, one of the taboo spells crafted by the brilliant Fire Fiend! You’re strong, Hero, but not even you can overcome an army of the dead that numbers in the tens of thousands! Curse your poor choice of battleground!”

Alice said nothing.

She’s right; these are impossible odds. But...But what does that matter?! I went on weaving all the ice magic I could muster, determined not to give in. *After all...*

“I’m Mr. Allen’s student!” I shouted. “It will take more than this to keep me down!”

“You don’t know when you’re beaten,” Edith said, with a disdainful sniff. “Just give up. By now, your defective key is dead in the Fire Fiend’s tower! And Her Holiness will surely be pleased when I return with the blood of the Hero *and* the Howards. But have no fear—you won’t really die. Her Holiness desires a world of bliss for all. Once the experiment is complete...” Under her hood, her lips curled upward in an ecstatic smile.

What experiment? Are that skeleton dragon and this reconstructed taboo merely by-products? And...they’ve locked Mr. Allen—whom they call a “defective key”—in the Fire Fiend’s tower?

“People will gain the power to transcend death and be as gods, free to resurrect at will. Strife will end, and so will the persecution of the beastfolk, the houseless, immigrants, and orphans. The whole world will be at peace. Your sacrifice now is no sacrifice at all—merely a glorious and temporary death!”

I was too stunned to speak, while Alice maintained her silence.

What...What in the world is she talking about?

“We seek the complete and total restoration of the great spell the legendary Saint once wielded—Resurrection!” Edith declared, enraptured. “Her Holiness will bring us a world where no child need ever weep!”

Harshly, I shouted, “Are you out of your—”

Alice held up her left hand to stop me and said, “Mmm. I get the picture.” She still sounded detached, although the undead

warriors surrounding us already numbered well over ten thousand. “Your mistress is smart—she makes things sound nice, and hard to disagree with. Even *I* long to speak with the dead sometimes.”

I remembered the smiling face of my late mother, Rosa Howard.

“But eternal life?” Alice continued, her tone hardening. “There’s no such thing. All people die. Humans, elves, dwarves...and even half-wolves like you have that in common.”

Edith stiffened.

After a moment, a hushed “What?” escaped my lips.

Alice held her sword aloft. “But that’s why people pass on their feelings and preserve them—why, sustained by those feelings, they keep moving forward. If you would deny that and slay the world with the despair you call hope...”

“I-Impossible,” Edith stammered.

“I-Incredible,” I whispered as Alice’s body released a superhuman burst of mana, showering us in flashes of lightning. Then the blinding lights coalesced into shining wings, on which she soared into the sky.

“In the name of Alvern, stewards of this world from which the gods have perished,” the Hero declared, “I will stop you.”

A violent gust threw back Edith’s hood, revealing beast ears—smaller than Caren’s but still unmistakable—and two little horns. “Shut up!” she screamed, gnashing her teeth so ferociously I could hear it from where I stood. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut uuup! Her Holiness reached out and saved even a wretch like me! I won’t let you deny that and live to tell about it! Revenant soldiers, I want that woman dead!”

The army of the deceased writhed, formed ranks, and surged like a river toward the airborne Alice...who brought down her sword with a faint look of sorrow.

“Thousand Bolts.”

I’d thought myself used to the sound of lightning magic after seeing so much of Caren’s, but Alice’s spell was in a class of its own. I could tell that Edith was screaming but couldn’t make out her words as I instinctively covered my face with my hands. I couldn’t even hear my own cry amid the thunderous crash and the blaze of white light that enveloped all Rostlay. I could almost believe the world was ending.

At last, the flash and the rumble ceased, and I lowered my hands.

"What?" I murmured again, stupefied. There had been at least ten thousand undead soldiers, and that single spell had slain...*all* of them?!

Edith was nowhere in sight, and her barrier was gone too. I couldn't sense the spell-soldiers that Mina and the others had been fighting either. Apparently, that blast of lightning had swept them all away. Yet the force of their malediction remained.

"She got away," Alice grumbled as she alighted noiselessly in front of me, her wings vanishing, and returned her sword to its sheath. "I hate it when the only thing they know how to do right is run. Are you hurt, Saint Wolf?"

"No, but thank you for your concern and for your aid," I replied, bowing to her. Then I crossed my wand and rapier above my head, and a swirling mix of white and azure mana began to form around me.

Alice looked nonplussed. "What are you going to do?"

"All I can to purify this place before the mana seeps into the land," I said. "Otherwise, this will become barren ground where nothing can grow."

She made an odd noise—it sounded like "Ahumph"—then swayed from side to side in evident delight. "*Stella*, you're a much better match for him than the scarlet crybaby. You just had a rough time, but you still think of others as soon as it's over. If not for your cursed bosoms, we could have been comrades. What a shame. Ever thought of plucking them off?"

"C-Certainly not!" I exclaimed, hastily wrapping my arms protectively around my own chest.

Alice smiled ever so slightly, drew her sword, and held it to my wand and rapier.

What is this feeling? It reminds me a little of the time I linked mana with Mr. Allen.

"I owe him," she said, "and I don't think he'll mind me paying some of my debt to one of his students. Purify as hard as you can. I'll help."

"R-Right!" I began constructing the ice-and-light-based purification spell from the second notebook Mr. Allen had given me.

It's strange—right now, I feel as though I could do anything.

I could no longer hear the din of battle nearby. For all intents and purposes, we seemed to be in the middle of a cease-fire. Out of

the corner of my eye, I spotted Mina and the other maids racing toward us, along with the Yustinian imperial princess and her guards.

Thank goodness. They all look safe.

Then my father's anxious voice burst from my communication orb. "Stella!" he bellowed. "Respond! Are you safe?! Are! You! Safe?! I'm on my way!"

"Father," I said slowly.

"The wolf is too loud," Alice grumbled. Then, in a teasing, singsong voice, "But you're well loved, Saint Wolf."

Everyone with an orb can hear him, can't they?

I finished constructing my spell and sent a communication of my own: "To everyone who can hear me, this is Stella Howard, and I am about to purify this ground. This is not an attack. Please remain calm and observe the result."

"Stella!" my father roared again. "What's going on?! Expla—"

I deactivated my orb and locked eyes with Alice. "I'm ready!"

"Mm-hmm!"

With all my might, I cast the compound ice-and-light purification spell Immaculate Snow-Gleam. Pale azure snowfall blanketed Rostlay, cleansing the defiled land.

My magic is being amplified? And beyond my wildest dreams, at that.

"His spell formulae are always pretty," Alice remarked happily while I watched the ongoing purification in mute amazement. "But I don't like that this one's just for you, Saint Wolf. I'll bully him later."

As the enchanted snow fell, an odd change was taking place around us. For some reason, both our own troops and the enemy soldiers—who had been on the verge of a rout—started to gather around us and press their hands together. I could hear them all murmuring.

"She must be a saint."

"It's a miracle."

"Oh, what have we done?"

"She's come to guide us."

Alice said, "Congratulations, Saint Wolf. As of today, you're a celebrity."

"I don't want to be famous," I replied stiffly. "I want to be—"

"His wife?"

“Of course I d—”

I blushed furiously and fell silent. Her sneaky gibe had nearly tricked me into revealing my most secret desire.

Wh-Who do I think I am to aim so high?!

Meanwhile, my spell was finishing its work. While sheathing my wand and rapier, I gave the smug Alice a reproving stare.

She put her sword back in its scabbard too, then stood on tiptoe and tenderly rubbed my head. “You’ll be everyone’s guide, Saint Wolf. Good girl. You worked hard.” She paused briefly before adding, “All I can do is slay things.”

“D-Don’t say that!” I protested, frantically waving my hands. Her presence had made my purification possible. “I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you so much.”

I heard a horse whinny and turned to find my father coming toward us.

Alice removed her hand from my head and said gravely, “It seems the scarlet crybaby cried so hard she’s lost her way. I’ll stop her. Help me.”

“I will,” I replied, although it took me a moment to get the words out. Edith had mentioned the south, which made the “scarlet crybaby” Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword. To be honest, I didn’t understand what the apostle meant by her “fall,” but I knew why it was happening—Lydia didn’t know whether Mr. Allen was alive or dead. I felt a little—just a very little—jealous of how strongly she felt for him.

“I have a promise too,” Alice said, swaying. “One passed down to me from long, long ago. It looks like the time has come to keep it. I don’t know the place, unfortunately, but that won’t matter—I’m sure the elementals and the star will guide me. I won’t stick my nose into fights between people, but I’ll go to the royal and then the eastern capital.”

I nodded firmly. “I’m with you!”

“Then wake me up at dinnertime,” Alice said, closing her eyes. “I’m going to sleep. And I want dessert after my meal.”

“Umm… I beg your pardon?”

She toppled into my arms. I caught her and found that she was sound asleep. And light—incredibly light.

My father and Mina ran up to us then, calling my name. I put my index finger to my lips and whispered, “Quiet!”

This battle had cost the empire its entire southern army—along with any hope of continuing the war, since it couldn’t afford to pull forces from its other borders. We were finally, *finally* free to march

on the royal capital. And as soon as we retook it, it would be time to head east! To where Mr. Allen and Caren were!

Holding the sleeping Alice in my arms, I filled myself with renewed determination.

Caren, please be safe.

Mr. Allen, this time I *will save* you. *Please wait just a little longer.*

High above, the clouds were scudding across the sky. A strong wind, it seemed, was blowing to the west.

*

The western capital was the beating heart of the Duchy of Lebufera. And on its outskirts, my house's inner courtyard was awash with flowers in full bloom.

Smiling down on them from her chair by the window was an elven beauty: Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera—or less formally Duchess Letty—who had presided two generations before our present duke. As she raised her pale-green teacup to me, her jade locks glistened with a sublime loveliness that hadn't changed in the past two hundred years.

"Marvelous!" she exclaimed. "Small wonder you've made your fortune on your flowers, O Lord Solos Solnhofen. Why, you must be the wealthiest elf alive by now."

"I wish you wouldn't tease me," I responded, frowning. "I cultivate flowers as a personal hobby—one which costs me more money than it's ever earned me. Me, the richest elf alive? I don't know where you get these ideas." While my finances weren't strained, they were hardly the envy of other western houses, whatever my former superior officer said. She hadn't called on me in decades, anyway.

"Truly? A clever fellow like you would never take a deficit lying down."

"You overestimate me. I am but a humble margrave," I demurred, a touch rattled despite my calm exterior. How had she guessed that I'd been experimenting, trying to find some way to export my flowers as far as the royal capital?!

Like all the other lords of the western march, my house had been defending our borders since the War of the Dark Lord. Two centuries spent glaring at the demon hordes across Blood River. And though we'd gone all that time without a major conflict, we

couldn't afford to cut corners with our military preparations—a source of constant financial difficulties.

"Can't we make peace with the demonfolk?" I grumbled.

"Impossible," came Duchess Letty's pitiless reply. She was still looking out the window. "Not a soul in the kingdom takes reconciliation seriously. In all these two hundred years, only Commander Shooting Star has ever truly tried to—"

She abruptly stopped speaking.

"Is something the matter?" I asked, turning to look out the window as well.

Something was flying high overhead. And it seemed to be coming closer, although my eyesight wasn't keen enough to make out what it was. My former superior, however, had no such difficulty.

"Well, I'll be," she said. "A sea-green griffin. I thought they only dwelt in the east these days—and near sacred ground in the Dark Lord's realm. Have the river forts sent word?"

"No," I replied. "And with the leaders of all the major western houses in the capital, debating our response to this eastern trouble, the forts along Blood River are on heightened alert. I doubt anything could slip past unobserved."

"I suppose not," Duchess Letty agreed with alacrity. Although she had retired from the front lines one hundred years ago in the aftermath of a certain incident, she had lost none of the martial prowess and quick wits that had made her a champion among champions during the war. She had once even matched blades with the Dark Lord. The western nobility still held her in awe.

Soon, even my eyes could see the griffin's distinctive long neck and emerald-and-azure plumage. It flapped frantically, winging its way toward us with a pronounced lack of grace—perhaps it was hurt, or perhaps merely tired. And...was that a person on its back?

A dozen or so of my people rushed out into the courtyard with spears, staves, and bows in hand.

"Hold your fire!" Duchess Letty barked sharply. Then she sprang out of the window and made for the center of the inner courtyard. I hastened to follow.

The griffin was clearly visible now, plummeting toward us. Duchess Letty slowed its descent with an artless wave of her left hand, and it came to rest beside a withered old tree. Her mastery of levitation never failed to impress. The exhausted griffin raised its

head, menacing us. As I'd thought, it bore a rider—a beastfolk girl wearing a Royal Academy uniform but no beret, and with a dagger at her hip. She didn't stir. From her lowered head and closed eyes, I gathered that she was unconscious.

"I'm amazed any sea-green griffin would allow itself to be ridden," I said. Then I noticed the way my former superior stared at the creature. "Letty, ma'am? Is anything the matter?"

"I know this mana," she murmured to the griffin. "Could you be of Luce's line?"

Two centuries ago, we had ridden like the wind into battle under the command of the legendary Shooting Star of the wolf clan. And Luce, a sea-green griffin with snow-white plumage, had been our leader's mount.

Calmly, Duchess Letty said, "I mean her no harm. Will you trust me?"

The griffin stared at her...then lowered its head, gently lifted the girl in its beak, and deposited her in Duchess Letty's waiting arms.

"You have my thanks," she said courteously. Then she did an about-face and barked, "Solos! Prepare a room and summon a doctor! And another for this griffin!"

"Yes, ma'am!" I responded, snapping to attention in spite of myself, and rushed off to arrange for a room.

Behind me, I heard Duchess Letty murmur, "This girl is of the wolf clan, as he was. And...And this dagger..."

I felt strangely elated. Something was about to start moving—something that had stopped on that unforgettable field at Blood River.

*

"Where am I?" I groaned haltingly. I didn't recognize the tidy room I'd just woken up in, and the mother griffin wasn't with me. Moonlight slanted in through the window, which gave me a view of greenery outside.

I sat up in bed and realized that I was wearing an unfamiliar pale-green nightgown.

"What happened to my Royal Academy uniform?" I wondered. "Did someone change me out of it?"

I had reached the western capital—that much was certain. But

both the mother griffin and I had been on our last legs after a storm had caught us in mid-flight. We had set a course for the mansion my dad's gadget pointed to, and then...

"My dagger and Allen's pocket watch!" I cried, suddenly remembering what was most important. Looking around in a panic, I found them both lying on a round table by my bedside, so I reached out and grabbed them. I could sense Allen's gentle mana as I ran my fingers over the dagger's sheath. His support spell was still in effect, even though he must have been running low on mana when he'd knocked me out. I could almost hear his tender voice saying, "Don't worry, Caren; I'll protect you."

"Allen, you idiot. You big, stupid fool," I muttered. Then "Big brother..." as I hugged the dagger and the watch to my chest and squeezed my eyes shut.

No. I can cry later. My duty comes first.

Just then, I heard a soft knock, and the door opened. I turned to look and saw a beautiful elven woman enter the room, carrying a folded bundle of clothes. Her jade-green hair hung to her shoulders, and her body was so perfectly proportioned that she seemed like the goddess out of the old myths. Her thin, pale-green clothes were clearly of the finest quality.

When she saw me, the woman smiled serenely and said, "Why, you've awakened."

"U-Um..." I faltered, confused, while she walked up to my bedside, sat down in a wooden chair, and deposited her bundle of clothes on the round table.

"Oh, have no fear," she continued, with an airy wave of her left hand. "I had my maids change your clothes and wash them as well. You may don them again later. I've also arranged a rest for the griffin."

"Th-Thank you very much."

Thank goodness; she made it too.

The woman pulled her chair closer. "Now, wolf-clan girls wearing Royal Academy uniforms are seldom seen in the western capital—especially not on sea-green griffins. And then there's your dagger. Who in creation—"

"Vice Commander!" called a man's voice from the corridor. "Where are you?! It's time to leave!"

"Already, he's run me to ground," the woman griped, clicking her tongue. "Some men's wits are too quick for comfort. Don't you

agree?"

"I...I suppose," I replied, nonplussed.

Then the door opened again, and an elven man rushed in. He had reddish brown hair, wore a sorcerer's robe in pale green and white with a sword belted at his waist, and appeared to be in a hurry. Ignoring my confusion, he stomped up to the woman and cried, "Hurry, ma'am! Please! Their Royal Highnesses, the crown prince and princess, and His Highness Duke Lebufera are already assembled in your house's main residence, as are both marquesses, the other margraves, and all the chieftains! I hope you realize that this council will decide what course the west will take!"

"Fret not," the woman said. "You have a reputation to uphold, O Lord Solos Solnhofen—every soul in the west knows of your bravery. And whether I go or stay, the army won't budge. At most, they'll reassign a force of the king's knights to the royal capital. What greater tedium than a council with a foregone conclusion?"

The man groaned. "Y-You have a point. Nevertheless..."

My heart skipped a beat. *The western houses aren't going to fight? And Lord Solnhofen! He's the margrave I'm supposed to tell about the Old Pledge!*

The woman watched my changing expression as a broad grin spread across her face. "As I see it, our guest here matters far more than some dull assembly," she said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Huh?" I stammered, taken aback. "Y-Yes!" I nodded, scrambling to lift the seal I'd placed on the pocket watch's lid. The two elves let out an appreciative "Oh-ho..." and "What a fine formula" in unison while I withdrew the scrap of black cloth from its hiding place.

"Lord Solnhofen," I said, looking the margrave in the eye, "I am Caren, daughter of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan, and I have come from the eastern capital to make an urgent request of you. Please, take me to see Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, at once!"

"Well now," the margrave murmured, squinting at me. "From the eastern capital, you say."

The woman said nothing.

I bowed deeply, held out the black cloth, and declared, "I invoke the Old Pledge!"

They both stiffened as though I'd given them an electric shock. Then the woman rose unsteadily from her seat and cupped her

hands over the cloth in mine, murmuring brokenly, “C-Could it be? C-Could...Could such a thing truly—”

“Letty, ma’am!” the man cried, his voice trembling as he turned questioningly to her. He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

He called her “vice commander” earlier, and now “Letty.” Could this lady be...

I let go of the black cloth, and the woman immediately clutched it to her chest. “Oh!” she sobbed as tears started to roll down her cheeks. “Oh! Oh! My...My Allen has finally...*finally* come back to me! Two...Two hundred years I’ve waited! Waited and waited for this day!” She wept like a little girl, wetting the floor with her tears.

Nearby, the margrave’s shoulders shook. “I never thought...I’d live to see the day,” he murmured, pressing a hand over his eyes.

For a while, sobs filled the room. Then the woman quietly stood up and dried her reddened eyes on her sleeve. “Forgive my shameful display. I am Leticia Lebufera, formerly second-in-command of the Shooting Star Brigade and holder of my house’s dukedom two generations past. Call me Letty. Now, O Caren, what do the beastfolk desire? Aid for the eastern capital, I presume?”

“No!” I answered immediately, bearing up under the gaze of this living legend.

Both elves gave me quizzical looks.

“*Not* aid for your city?”

“Then, what will you invoke the Old Pledge for?”

“We wish...”

I told them of our undreamed-of request and our predicament.

Silence filled the room. Then, quietly, but with unmistakable intensity, the margrave said, “Ma’am, this... The way it all lines up... It must be a miracle. We don’t deserve it, but...but the commander is still urging us onward!”

“I can hardly believe it. After two hundred years...the beastfolk made the same choice he did.” A fresh flood of tears wet Duchess Letty’s cheeks, and she trembled violently. She kept wiping them away as she continued, exhorting herself. “I know. Oh, I know! This is naught but coincidence. These insuppressible shivers and unbidden tears are naught but sentiment! This world is bereft of gods. No higher power would choose the wrong people to die—choose to rob me forever of the one who plucked me out of darkness when I was called the ‘cursed child of the Lebuferas’ and showed my young eyes that life was worth living.”

In my mind's eye, I saw two girls, one with scarlet hair and the other with bluish platinum. Suddenly, it all made sense—the weeping "girl" in front of me was just like Lydia and Tina.

"Yet!" Duchess Letty shouted. "Yet...Yet even so!" She had finished wiping the tears from her eyes—there was strength in them now, and a flood of emotions in her voice. "All my long—far, *far* too long—life since the War of the Dark Lord has been for this day—this very moment!"

The margrave kept his hand over his eyes as he said, "Pardon me; I must prepare for battle" and left the room. As soon as he was in the corridor, he let out a long, loud whoop of exaltation.

I shared a look with Duchess Letty, and we both giggled. Then the elven legend straightened herself and said, "Two hundred years and more ago, on the banks of Blood River, I swore an oath to the only lord I shall ever have so long as I live—an oath which, though it be old, I must fulfill. Now I, Leticia Lebufera, once second-in-command of the Shooting Star Brigade, affirm that I...I shall grant your wish!" She paused, then asked, "Can you walk?"

"I can!"

"Good. Dress yourself. And then...accompany me!"

"Huh? Wh-Where to?" I asked, with less assurance than I would have liked. I must have been more on edge than I'd realized.

Duchess Letty chuckled excitedly. "Where else but the main house of the Lebuferas? Why, by now, they must have grown tired of waiting and begun the council without us! Oh, and one other thing: O Caren, pray show me your dagger on the way. It is an ancient blade—a gift from Twin Heavens to my one and only, Shooting Star."

Epilogue

After changing back into my Royal Academy uniform, I went with Duchess Letty to the Lebufera estate, the seat of power in the west of the kingdom. The house was an opulent mansion of white and green marble. Inside, I found myself walking down an incredibly high-ceilinged corridor. The passage ended in a short flight of stairs, at the top of which I could see a massive door. Several elves stood in front of it.

"I daresay we're not too late," said Duchess Letty, grinning and twirling her spear. "The council is still in session. Fortune smiles upon you, O Caren."

Apparently, all the lords and chieftains of the west had gathered here to meet with the royal family, which had escaped its capital city. They were currently discussing the rebellion. And I would need to face them and—

Duchess Letty gently clasped my hands. "Fear not, O Caren. I'm with you. And though you wouldn't know it to look at me, I'm practically deified in the west."

Before I could answer, the elven knights raised their weapons and challenged us.

"Halt!"

"Who goes there?!"

"They're armed!"

"A student?"

I gave Duchess Letty a dubious look. The practically-a-goddess shrugged and said, "To think that any westerner wouldn't know me. Mayhap I've been a recluse too long!"

The knights started weaving spells, warier than ever.

Duchess Letty grumbled, "I commend your commitment to your duty." As her colossal jade-green mana materialized, color drained from the knights' faces. Then they started quaking. We hopped lightly to the top of the stairs, and the former duchess continued, "I'm Leticia Lebufera. May we enter?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

The knights pushed on the double doors. As they swung open, a man's carrying voice reached us from inside.

"...Then we are agreed on the plan proposed by His Royal Highness, Crown Prince John and the leader of the court sorcerers. The western houses will not dispatch troops to quell this rebellion. A detachment of the Order of Royal Knights will work with other houses to achieve..."

I gasped.

They won't send troops?

"I thought as much," Duchess Letty murmured stoically. "Come, O Caren." She strode through the doorway, and I hurried after her.

The council hall was enormous. A massive marble table sat in the center of the room, surrounded by a dozen or so people who looked up questioningly at our intrusion—and got a shock when they saw who I was with. Elves were the most numerous among the small crowd, but I also saw dwarves, giants, dragonfolk, demisprites, and even beastfolk of the lion clan, which had no presence in the eastern capital.

Oh, there's the headmaster.

There weren't many humans...but I did recognize one man from the Royal Academy—Gerhard Gardner, the head of the court sorcerers and the man who had stopped Allen from becoming one, in league with the ex-prince Gerard. I bristled.

All the seated figures seemed to be lords or chieftains, while the people standing behind them looked like bodyguards. At the far end of the table sat a young blond man and a beautiful girl so dazzling she took my breath away. Since they were both human, I assumed they were royalty. The man looked like a pushover. And His Majesty was absent.

A white wolf rested at the girl's feet, and there was a black cat on the table.

Anko? No, it couldn't be.

From the seat nearest to the door, an aristocratic elf man with pale-green hair said, "I didn't expect to see you here, grandmother."

"I didn't expect to come, O Leo," Duchess Letty answered flippantly.

The young elf man—Leo Lebufera, one of the kingdom's Four Great Dukes—grimaced, as did the heads of the other houses. Only the chieftains of the dwarves, giants, dragonfolk, and demisprites appeared unmoved.

Are these the squadron commanders who fought alongside Shooting Star? I wondered, remembering the picture books that Allen and I had read as children. After all, the aged dwarf was unarmed, the giant sat on a boulder he'd brought with him, the dragonfolk chieftain had propped a massive single-edged sword against his chair, and a distinctive floral hat lay on the table in front of the demisprite.

"What a sight," said Duchess Letty, scanning the room. "Both marchionesses, three margraves—all except for Solos—and every chieftain all gathered in one place. Yet I don't see His Majesty. Are his wounds as bad as that?"

"They certainly aren't good," the duke grudgingly admitted. "Who is your companion, grandmother? This is no place for students!"

"And Your Highnesses must be the crown prince and princess," the former duchess continued gracefully, unruffled by her successor's irritation. "I am Leticia Lebufera. Pray pardon my late arrival—I was occupied with a matter of the highest import."

"You consider something more important than this council?" the duke demanded, knitting his brows in displeasure.

"Yes, I do. I'm here because I must speak to my old comrades in arms. I have at least enough courtesy for that."

The four chieftains pressed Duchess Letty, a hint of menace in their tones.

"Courtesy?"

"Oh?"

"Is that any way to say hello after close to a hundred years?"

"State your business!"

Whoa. The storybooks got them spot on.

I flinched, but the Emerald Gale smiled and winked at me over her shoulder. It was finally time. I was trembling with nerves, and my throat felt parched. To be honest...I was on the verge of tears.

You're pathetic, Caren! What did you even come here for?!

Just then, the white wolf walked up and plonked itself down in front of me.

"Chiffon?" the princess gasped, putting a hand over her mouth.

Next, I felt a weight on my left shoulder. "A-Anko?" I murmured, taken aback.

A buzz of voices filled the hall.

"The divine wolf and the night cat moved to defend her?"

“Impossible.”

“Well now...”

The black cat licked my cheek, while the white wolf slapped my leg with its tail. They were encouraging me.

I stood up to my full height and said, “I am Caren, daughter of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan, and I have come here from the eastern capital.”

Another stir ensued.

“The *eastern* capital?”

“How on earth...?”

“What’s the situation there?”

“What have you come to demand from us?!”

“The matter is already settled. We will concentrate on defending the west and—”

“Be silent!” barked Duchess Letty. “The brave girl who journeyed here alone from the distant east is trying to speak.”

The hall fell silent. I drew Allen’s watch from my pocket, opened the lid, and held up the little scrap of black cloth in my right hand. Then, softly, I announced:

“The beastfolk...invoke our Old Pledge with the Lebuferas.”

The assembled pillars of the west half rose from their seats in astonishment.

“It can’t be.”

“Am...Am I dreaming?”

“Is that cloth genuine?”

“Then, is Solos missing because...”

“If so, our duty is clear!”

Duke Leo Lebufera roared, “Silence!” Then he stood and turned to Duchess Letty, his eyes brimming with intense emotion. “Is that really it, grandmother? Is that what the great Shooting Star left in your keeping?”

“Yes, I would know it anywhere,” she replied. “This is the very cloth Allen gave to me!”

“Then...Then there can be only one answer!” Duke Lebufera cried as he strode forward...and went down on one knee before me, a mere wolf-clan schoolgirl.

“Huh?” I stammered. “What?!”

“We hear and obey!” bellowed the duke. “The Lebuferas will fulfill their Old Pledge!”

“What?!” spluttered Crown Prince John, who had been looking

on in silent amazement.

"Duke Lebufera, would you tell us more about this 'Old Pledge'?" interjected the radiant blonde princess beside him.

The duke, who was back on his feet and no longer even trying to hide his excitement, closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and replied in a trembling voice, "When the War of the Dark Lord was in its final days, the people of the west grew too eager for glory. With the Knights of the Holy Spirit and the Algrens, we rushed into battle early...and suffered a rout. The human cause came within a hair's breadth of disaster. Salvation came from the Leinsters, the Howards...and the wolf clan's legendary Shooting Star! The people of the west learn his exploits as a bedtime story, gnash our teeth at his end, and swear a solemn oath: 'If the time comes, we will repay our debt'!"

The headmaster took up the explanation. "When Shooting Star crossed Blood River for the second time, he tore a piece from the hem of his robe and gave it to Leticia, who was then his second-in-command. At the same time, he entrusted her with this message: 'All I have is for the beastfolk.' After the war, when the then Dukes Algren and Lebufera heard of his words, they each made a pledge. The Algrens swore to grant the beastfolk autonomy in and around the Great Tree, while the Lebuferas vowed to grant the bearer of that last scrap of black cloth any one wish in their power. To make good on that pledge is every westerner's fondest wish." After a pause, he said to me, "Caren, what do the beastfolk desire?"

"You have to ask?!" the aged dwarf—Leyg Vaubel—exclaimed, bursting with enthusiasm. "The liberation of the eastern capital! What else could it be?!"

Beside him, the grizzled giant chieftain—Dormur Gang—closed his eyes and nodded silently, stroking his gray beard.

I was secretly elated to see these legends straight out of the picture books. Nevertheless, I shook my head and said, "The liberation of the eastern capital is not our wish." All the questioning stares that statement drew were nearly too much for me, but I squeezed the pocket watch and declared, "In fulfillment of your pledge, we ask you...to save a single member of the wolf clan."

Again, the hall descended into shocked confusion. And no wonder—we had held this wish in reserve for two hundred years, and now we were using it for just one person.

The dragonfolk chieftain—Egon Io, "the Battlemaster"—looked

at me with silver eyes the same color as his magnificent hair. “The royal capital I could understand,” he said, “but may we truly defer retaking the east for this?”

“You may,” I replied.

“And what is this person’s name?” asked the demisprite chieftain in a low voice. It was hard to see her as anything but a little girl.

My heart raced. I closed my eyes, drew in a deep breath, then shouted at the top of my lungs, “Allen! He’s my brother—not by blood, but the only one I’ve got! Please! Please, please, *please* save my big brother!”

Startled cries escaped the four chieftains.

“Th-That name,” Chieftain Leyg murmured, his voice shaking. “A-And of the wolf clan too. B-But it couldn’t be…could it, ma’am?”

“Mere coincidence,” Duchess Letty replied, with a slow shake of her head. “Yet the fellow followed in the commander’s footsteps, and he’s been taken prisoner. Oh, Luce’s great-great-granddaughter flew Caren here, though. And see that dagger at her hip? It was the commander’s.”

“I see,” the aged dwarf said slowly. Then, louder, “I see. I see!” He burst into a roar of laughter. When it subsided, he called for the guard waiting behind him—a young dwarf man with curly reddish-brown hair and a one-handed axe slung from his belt. “Admiran!”

“Y-Yes?”

Chieftain Leyg opened his eyes wide, weeping as he shouted, “Order all clans to form up for battle! We’ll leave any stragglers behind! And if they don’t like it, tell them to run like mad! We’ll never—*never*—be late to the fight again!” Sobs shook the aged dwarf’s body, which almost seemed like one solid mass of muscle. “We arrived late to Blood River—it doesn’t matter why—and we failed to save him! We couldn’t save the kindest man in the world—the man who saved us from the brink of ruin! And I refuse to let history repeat itself! This war will be the last chance for all western dwarves to redeem our honor!”

“Aye,” the young man responded. “Aye!” He rushed out of the hall in high spirits. His chieftain followed suit with a parting “Well then, I’ll be seeing you. Our axes will be first to the fray!”

A series of loud splashes filled the hall—the sound of water falling on marble. I turned to see the renowned old giant burying his face in his hands and shedding a vast flood of tears. Then he

called the young giant behind him, clad in heavy plate from head to toe and carrying a massive war hammer. “Agrelo.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“I owed that man more than I could ever repay—even with my life. Yet I couldn’t even be there to shield him when he needed me most. It’s time to wipe away our shame. Without him, we would have perished long ago. And so...” The elder giant opened his eyes for the first time since my arrival. “What are the giants worth if we won’t risk our lives now?! We honor our oaths to the dead! I gave that man my word, and this time, I mean to keep it! Sound every horn in our lands until they burst!”

“Consider it done!”

“Our preparations take a little longer than the other peoples’. Excuse us,” said the heroic old giant, lifting his boulder with ease. Then he and his young guard left the hall.

“What shall we do, father?” a dragonfolk woman in light armor asked the Battlemaster, who sat with his eyes closed and his arms folded.

“As you please,” the chieftain replied. “The arguments advanced by the crown prince and the leader of the court sorcerers have merit—defending the west is our chief duty. But I will go! I *must* go. For you see...” The old warrior’s voice shook, although he was renowned for his composure in even the fiercest battles. “I...I swore an oath to my friend, and I must keep it—even if it costs me my life!”

“Understood,” the woman responded, with a reverent bow. “Then by my name as the oracle, I, Aathena Io, daughter of Egon, shall summon all the dragonfolk clans. We have long heard tales of the parting at Blood River, and we cannot be the only people absent when the oath is fulfilled!”

“I wonder where you get that from,” the chieftain grumbled, with the briefest of chuckles. “Follow me!”

“Yes, sir!”

Aathena and Chieftain Egon strode off, only pausing before the doors to bow on their way out.

That left only the demisprite chieftain. “Those oafish men are always so quick to run off,” she griped, clucking as she ruffled her long light-orange hair. “Haven’t they learned *anything* in the past two hundred years?”

“Lady Chise,” called the pretty demisprite girl behind her, who

wore a large flower-shaped clip in her hair.

Chise Glenbysidhe, the Blessed of the Flower Dragon, was the chieftain of the demisprites and one of the mightiest sorceresses in the kingdom. She had received a dragon's blessing and lived to tell the tale.

"Ando," she said, "send word round to all the old-timers who are still kicking. Tell them it's 'the commander's last wish.'"

"Of course," the girl responded. "By when shall I ask them to assemble?"

"Tomorrow night at the latest, and they have my permission to make full use of strategic teleportation magic. Anyone who can't make it is dead to me. We can't wait any longer than that. Not one moment longer!" After giving these brisk orders, Chieftain Chise stared into space. Tears glistened like jewels in her eyes.

"That lupine busybody has kept us all alive for a long, long time now. The dolt—the incurably naive fool—just flashed that smile of his and ordered us to 'live out our own lives.' Then, just like that, he was gone—off to save Crescent Moon. How is that fair?! Of course, I'll pay my debts, even now that he's dead. I'm a woman of my word. Still..." Chieftain Chise picked up her floral hat off the table, jammed it onto her head, and pulled the brim low over her eyes. "I wouldn't have minded paying some of what I owed him while he was still alive. I really wouldn't."

The veteran sorceress sobbed as she fluttered the wings on her back and left the hall. The girl she'd called Ando followed her, pausing at the door to bow to us all and say, "Forgive us. Lady Chise still adores Shooting Star."

After that, powerful nobles left one after another, all brimming with joy and eager for battle.

"D-Duke Lebufera," said the crown prince, finally snapping out of his daze. "D-Did we not just decide to focus on the defense of the west?"

Duke Leo Lebufera nodded. "Your Royal Highness," he replied, "that ought to show you how much weight the Old Pledge carries with us here. We could die for it, and that still wouldn't be enough. We live longer than humans"—his voice rose with bold determination—"but unlike the Algrens, we are not so shameless as to forget our history! We remember who saved us from the brink of annihilation, and we remember that our blunders cost him his life at Blood River!"

“Y-Yes, but, well...” Crown Prince John faltered and then fell silent. Behind him, Gardner grimaced.

“Your Royal Highness, I leave the defense of the west in the hands of the Order of Royal Knights,” the duke concluded. “We must see our duty done! Dodo, Foudre, will you stay behind?”

The two elven marchionesses were still in the hall. Both shrugged.

“Surely you jest.”

“My runaway elder brother has returned, so I intend to put him through his paces.”

A strangled—and pathetic—cry escaped the headmaster. He was related to a marchioness?!

“Please excuse me,” Duke Lebufera added, with a courteous bow to Crown Prince John. “I have a war to prepare. Grandmother, what do you intend?”

“To whom do you think you speak?” replied the former duchess. She struck the floor with the butt of her spear, and a flash of jade-green mana whirled through the hall. “I am Leticia Lebufera, the Emerald Gale, right-hand woman of the legendary Shooting Star. Make haste. Should you tarry...the Shooting Star Brigade and I will win the war ourselves!”

“Well, I wouldn’t want that. Till later, then.”

Duke Lebufera departed with a rueful grin. That left only the pale-faced crown prince, the impassive Gerhard Gardner, a guard of court sorcerers under his command, Lord Rodde, Duchess Letty, the princess, and her bodyguards. Apparently, I had accomplished my mission.

I did it, Allen. And I worked hard. Will you tell me what a good job I did?

The tension left me—maybe that was why I suddenly felt so weak. I heard Duchess Letty cry my name as I toppled forward...and landed, with a muffled grunt, on the white wolf’s fluffy belly. It gave me a worried look, so I rubbed its head. I also hugged Anko, whom I’d dragged down with me. Almost immediately, I felt tired and sleepy. I couldn’t keep...my eyes open.

Soft footfalls told me someone was approaching. They crouched down and laid a tender hand on my cheek. “I never expected to meet you in a place like this,” they murmured, casting a healing spell charged with a massive quantity of mana. “Your brother has done a lot for me, so let me do something to return the favor.

Cheryl Wainwright never forgets a debt."

Princess Cheryl Wainwright? She's the other classmate Allen always wrote about at the Royal Academy.

While Her Royal Highness's warm mana lulled me to sleep, I heard her make a dignified declaration: "John, someone from the royal family must fight. I'll join the eastward march!"

*

"O Caren, we're almost there. Don't fall off, now. And pray tell me if you feel unwell," Duchess Letty said, looking over her shoulder at me while she rode the sea-green griffin.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" I responded and tightened my grip. Anko was perched on my left shoulder.

It was the night of the day after the western houses had begun to mobilize, and the former duchess was taking me to the army's temporary maneuvering ground, located at the base of a great spire on a hill just outside the western capital. It turned out to be a simple affair, surrounded by a low earthen wall and a covered walkway to keep the rain off. The mana was so fresh that the whole thing must have been built just the day before. Below us, countless green lights lined the horizon, and as many bloodred lights lay beyond them.

"That's Blood River," I murmured.

"Indeed it is. We built the western capital close enough to give orders to the river forts," replied Duchess Letty. "Brace for landing."

As she brought the griffin lower, I surveyed the maneuvering ground and let out a cry of surprise. I couldn't help myself—hundreds of troops stood assembled there, around a raised platform from which a commander could issue orders. And all those battle-hardened soldiers—elves, dwarves, giants, dragonfolk, and demisprites—were staring fixedly at the old, old battle standard raised atop the platform.

"So, they all came. O Caren, I leave her in your hands!" the elven beauty called. Without waiting for me to respond, she seized her spear and leapt gracefully down onto the platform.

"Huh?! Oh! Y-Yes, ma'am!" I stammered, scrambling forward to continue guiding the griffin's descent.

Duchess Letty's arrival didn't faze the soldiers—they saluted her in disciplined unison.

The Emerald Gale returned the salute, struck the platform with the butt of her spear, and said, “It’s been too long, O you tough old survivors! We’ve fought through many a battle, and we swore—and failed—to perish with Shooting Star. None of us will ever forget the bitter tears we shed on the banks of Blood River, O my old comrades in arms.” She drew in a deep breath, then let it out. “Rejoice! Fortune smiles upon you! We swore an oath to Shooting Star, the only commander we shall ever know! And at last, the time has come to keep it!”

A tremendous roar of joy broke from the crowd. Every soldier had an arm in the air. Some were already weeping.

“We go now not to save the royal capital,” the former duchess continued quietly. “Nor the eastern capital. We go to the aid of a single private tutor—the Lady of the Sword’s partner, who for the past few years has made a name for himself throughout the continent as her ‘Brain.’”

The army began talking among itself.

“Her partner?”

“Have you heard of him?”

“The one they say drove off the black dragon.”

“I heard it was a two-winged devil.”

Duchess Letty resumed her explanation. “In the midst of this Great Folly, he served as rear guard while the beastfolk of the eastern capital fled to the Great Tree. And though he once reached safety himself, he set out once more to rescue stranded citizens...and suffered capture.”

I could hear the listeners muttering, “Wait,” “Yeah,” “That...That sounds...” “Just like the commander.” From the front row, an old dwarf wearing an eye patch called, “Ma’am! Tell us his name!”

The former duchess pressed the black cloth over her heart. Then, softly, she declared, “Allen. And though human, he is of the wolf clan by adoption.”

A stir filled the maneuvering ground. The sobs were getting louder.

“Once, we lost Shooting Star before our very eyes,” she said, with a beautiful smile. “Yet once is enough for a lifetime. Yes, quite enough! By the Old Pledge, we to whom the future was entrusted shall save the Shooting Star of a new era! Don’t you think...that would please the old softy?”

The maneuvering ground erupted in tearful laughter.

Duchess Letty held her spear high and bellowed, “To the royal capital! Then on to the eastern! Now we shall fulfill our oath to Shooting Star!”

“To the royal capital!” a great chorus repeated, splitting the dark night like a clap of thunder. “Then on to the eastern! Now...Now we shall fulfill our oath to Shooting Star!”

Maybe the Dark Lord’s army can hear them from clear across Blood River, I thought. When I landed the griffin near the covered walkway along the edge of the ground, the chorus was still roaring. I was stroking the griffin’s neck when I heard a staff strike the ground behind me and turned to see the...

“Headmaster!”

“Well met, Caren. All the way from the eastern capital! And alone! Why...Why...” Words failed Lord Rodde, the Archmage and headmaster of the Royal Academy. After a period of silence, he abruptly launched into an explanation of the war. “The Leinsters overwhelmed the League of Principalities, and the Howards crushed the imperial army. Both ducal houses have already begun their march on the royal capital. I hear that Stella and Felicia have made names for themselves as well.”

“Stella and Felicia?” I echoed, picturing my best friends’ faces. I was taken aback, but I knew them well enough to feel certain that they had both done absolutely everything they could. In any case, I wanted to see them as soon as I possibly could. I wanted to talk with them!

“I’ll assign you a bodyguard going forward,” the headmaster continued, giving me an earnest look. “Both the young one and Anko approve.”

“What?! B-But I don’t deserve that kind of...” I faltered, bowled over by the sudden offer. I was merely a student.

“You’re Allen’s sister. And besides, I doubt anyone could stop *them* from defending you.” While Anko shushed me with an adorable forepaw, the headmaster’s left hand indicated a group of sorcerers and swordsmen waiting under the roof of the walkway. They were young men and women of various races, but they all dressed in the same sorcerous style that Allen usually preferred.

I met the gaze of the small young woman in the lead, who wore a black witch’s hat and carried a staff, and saw heartfelt anger and devotion in her eyes. She bowed deeply to me.

“These are the professor’s students,” the headmaster said. “They absolutely insist on keeping you safe.”

“Then, these are Allen’s...”

“They were his devoted underclassmen. And they wouldn’t hesitate to risk their lives for him if need be.”

The black cat still on my left shoulder meowed in confirmation. The cheers had finally begun to subside. I was unconsciously running my fingers along my dagger’s sheath when a green light flashed from the tip of the spire.

A signal?

A short time passed. Then, far beyond the horizon, a bloodred light flickered several times and vanished.

“I see eloquence hasn’t deserted them,” the headmaster remarked, with an amused sniff.

“Um... Was that exchange of signals with—”

Before I could finish my question, a lively, spirited cry from Duchess Letty burst on my ears. “March, O Caren! And till we reach the royal capital, don’t leave my side!”

“Oh! Y-Yes, ma’am!” I answered. “Goodbye, Headmaster. Please tell me more later.” With a quick bob of my head, I hurried off after the swift-footed former duchess.

Anko and the sea-green griffin let out eager cries.

*

Several days later, during our march to the royal capital, the headmaster explained the signals that had passed between the Lebuferas and the Dark Lord’s forces. The exchange meant:

“We go to keep our pledge to Shooting Star. If you wish to invade, feel free.”

“Joyous tidings. You must tell us the full tale someday. May you succeed in your mission.”

The Lebuferas would go, and the Dark Lord’s army would stay right where it was. We had almost nothing left to worry about. Three great ducal houses—the Howards in the north, the Leinsters in the south, and the Lebuferas in the west—were about to launch a single massive counterattack.

Wait for me, Allen! I swear that this time, I really am going to save you!

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. Long time no see. It's been another four months—four months that nearly k-killed me. Always remember to keep your schedule under control.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although, as usual, I've revised about ninety percent of it. No, really, it counts as revision (clenches fist).

As far as the story goes, volume six focused on the south, so I had to give the north equal treatment. And that's how a gallant Lady Stella ended up on the front cover, although I was torn between her and little Atra.

The girls performed superhuman feats in this volume, but they're still nowhere near their full potential. With Allen's help, they'll keep growing. The most frightening thing about him is, put simply, that he brings out improvement across the board. Or, in everyday terms...everyone works hard to earn his praise.

That said, Lady Stella certainly has come a long way. Back when I wrote volume three, I never dreamed that she would claim such a prominent role for herself. I-Is this what an awakened Saint Wolf can do? And what should I dress her in next? At the moment, I'm thinking beast ears and [REDACTED].

Now you see what a certain southern lady who went berserk in volume six is like without Allen. She slices and incinerates without emotion, then holes up and prays. I really must do something about her in volume eight. Lynne, let's do our best together (she's one of my few allies among the cast). What comes next will be...a treat.

I also have an announcement to make: after much blood, sweat, and tears, volume two of *Henkyō Toshi no Ikuseisha* (*The Mentor in a Frontier City*) will go on sale next month (I'm still working on it). Like the first volume, it makes a fun companion piece to read alongside *Private Tutor*!

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. I deeply appreciate your help, and I'm sorry for being such a handful. I look forward to working with you again

next volume.

The illustrator, cura. Lady Stella looks so dignified! Another set of perfect illustrations!

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. The next volume will conclude part two, and every chapter will be a spectacle!

Riku Nanano

"Onward to the western capital and its rulers, the Ducal House of Lebufera!"
Allen's younger sister
Caren
A model student who achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits and despite the lingering racial prejudice that she faced as a member of the wolf-clan minority.
After Allen's capture, she continues to support the eastern capital—but for how long?!
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
7

“You’re still. In. Range.”
“Don’t go *too* hard on them.”
The Angel of Death had arrived.
The Leinsters’ head maid
Anna
Both a maid in service to the Ducal House of Leinster and Duchess Lisa’s right-hand woman. She arrives in the eastern capital to rescue Caren and Richard from the Algren onslaught.

Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Allen
A young man who fails to appreciate his own unrivaled control of magic. He was abducted and shut up in a mysterious ruin on the Four Heroes Sea by the Church of the Holy Spirit.
"I owe you my life. Now it's up to me to return the favor."
Mystery girl
Atra
A young girl Allen encountered in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea. She guides him deeper into the ancient tower.

With all my might,
I cast the compound ice-and-light
purification spell Immaculate Snow-Gleam.
Pale azure snowfall blanketed Rostlay,
cleansing the defiled land.
“Mm-hmm!”
“I’m ready!”
Duke Howard’s eldest daughter
Stella
Tina’s elder sister and the president of the Royal Academy student council. Under Allen’s guidance, Stella regained confidence in her own ability as the future Duchess Howard.
Hero
Alice
A girl with long, platinum-blonde hair and beautiful, doll-like features. As the successor to the title of Hero, she is feared by the leaders of all nations. In principle, she remains aloof from human conflicts and wields her sword only against “enemies of the world.”

CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Epilogue
Afterword

"Well, well, well!
Just the moment
I've been waiting for!
Today's the day we
soak in the tub
together!"

Fashion-forward maid

Lily

The Leinster Maid Corps's number three, Lily, is extremely quick-witted despite her usual carefree attitude.
Her status seems to merit the title "lady," but the details are unclear.

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 7
by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Riku Nanano, cura 2020
Illustrations by cura

First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: April 2023